Adam Fieled Something Solid

SOMETHING SOLID

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Cover image by Adam Fieled
Mary Evelyn Harju, Montreal, Quebec, 2003
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Apologia

Something Solid, unlike Apparition Poems, is a book which knows its place. The God-forsaken violence of the poems strung in numbers is replaced by the textual sangfroid of consolidation with the core values which render poetry useful for most literary landscapes— incidents and situations chosen for interrogation, involving the poet in memory, sensuality, and the formality of the traditional sonnet (and newfangled double sonnet, twenty-eight lines). It represents a downward curve, as it were, into these topos, rather than an upward curve into serious philosophical discourse. What would make the book more than a curiosity (or, perhaps, anti-curiosity) to such discourse, is a Barthes-ian acknowledgement of a basic literary principle which philosophy finds distasteful, but which nonetheless has and will always dictate individual literary economies— we tend to read and re-read what we find pleasurable to read and re-read. The pleasure principle inhering in texts and textuality may dictate that Something Solid, despite its not being angled in a strictly original way, will be read and re-read with more pleasure and avidity than Apparition Poems, which most, including discursive minds, may choose to respect from a distance. The version of poetic memory explored here has as its ensign an engagement with two periods in time, one place specific— the Nineties, and Aughts Philadelphia. Built into the book's willfully conventional dynamic, is the imposition, on these periods, of an aura of romantic chaos, of the possibility of the poet's consciousness, in medias res in the appointed zeitgeists, conflating internal with external vicissitudes, so that the book resonates as both completely personal and ripe for universalization. The poet stands within the text and its dramas, a self-conscious synecdoche. The narrative-thematic context is semi-autobiography.

Where sensuality is taken in the text is to a locale configured to purify and transcendentalize its manifestation into an emergence of dramatic, imaginative and tactile reality. Bodies are not seen as real but hyperreal; the carnal acts as a portal into its own effacement, into the larger existence of Eros as an idea and ideal to mystify the objective-discursive. Also, Eros subsists to express the effacement of objectivity into immediacy, drama, and the aesthetic establishing its own, rightful claim on aestheticized language, in as ideal form as the text and the poet's talent will allow. Imagination in the text establishes its own body— possibilities glimpsed, starting from sense. Undulant, an early standout from the text, performs this task— layering sensual and imaginative data, the tactile over and under the imaginative, so as to solidify, both pleasure in the text for capable readers, immersion in time-zone or zeitgeist awareness, and formal innovation for what peregrinations can be compressed into fourteen lines. This ambitious task subsists past the manner of Keats and Wordsworth, in their respective sonnets, into a Neo-Romanticism (the presumed aegis under which the text falls) of all these conflated elements, coalescing in simultaneity. Not philosophy, but not simple either. Frequencies begins from more sophisticated ground— the meta-aesthetic— one artist addressing another. Then, the poet's imagination somersaults into an assaying of the imagination of the Other. That the meta-aesthetic manifests alongside a raw revelation of carnality makes Frequencies ring out or emanate, with a Manneristic, perhaps, sense of exaggeration, on double, triple, and quadruple levels. As is not irrelevant, both Frequencies and Undulant are darkly colored, with under and overtones of chaos and violence. They do have a way of echoing Apparition Poems. Eros is not dulcet here but foreboding, edgy. Textual interrogation reveals no perceived placidity. The language knows its place, is polished; the represented situations are raw.

The text's extensive immersion in visual art, through the prominent placement in the text of Mary Evelyn Harju, Abby Heller-Burnham, and Jenny Kanzler, tilts the text towards a perpetual sense of ekphrasis, as an owned level. This level achieves a status of semi-dominance, developed along semi-dominant lines. The semi-dominance of a travelogue sensibility, from Philadelphia to New Hampshire to Montreal to Chicago, is also developed in tandem. The grounded quality of the text, against

Apparition Poems, answers perversion with exuberance, a haunted house with an eternal salon, down to a series of Creatrix muses who imbue the text, as has been said, with ekphrastic intention. This coloring or imbuing culminates in Starlight I and II, a miniaturized dialectic that takes (as Equations does not, exactly) the mysticism of romance and intoxication and confers judgement or an answer on the pursual of such, amid darker ("raw") material. The objective is thus established as one (Neo-Romantic) aegis for the subjective to sit under, in a text which takes its stripes both from the cognitive and the intuitive.

A point of emphasis around what I call "meta-aesthetic" or "meta-aestheticism." That Something Solid, as a text, itself emphasizes a sense of referentiality— that is, the text, as a body of literary work, both acknowledges and implicitly endorses bodies of work by other artists— the intentionality of the text was developed specifically to perform this task. Historicism is linked to bodies of artistic work the author wishes to both reference and represent. Beyond mere promotion, the text is meant to fulfill the task of adumbrating personalities, under the assumption that attendant bodies of work be interesting enough to warrant investigation by serious readers. This is particularly true of Abby Heller-Burnham. Without unduly needing to assay or redefine her artistic contribution to world culture, a poem like Marble takes an incident or situation from the end of the Aughts and develops it along lines appropriate to recognition that the incident or situation might be revelatory, and of permanent interest to those with an interest in painting. Fetishization of verisimilitude, and the perceived relevance of the internal sensibility of the constitutive subject, denotes here that because I, as author, am capable of introducing you to Abby Heller-Burnham, it behooves me and my literary enterprise to do so. Marble thus fulfills the intentions of meta-aesthetic writing— as text ancillary to, and intended to enhance, art itself ancillary to other art, and histories attendant on the manner in which these attachments and congeries are formed.

The sonnet, as a poetic form, is traditionally an enemy of philosophy. Brevity and compression of data are both adversarial to the development of discourse and discursive contexts. Why the sonnet here was chosen and set into dynamic motion was to undo preconceptions regarding what the sonnet's possibilities are, in practice, if hinged to a solidly placed premise. For the book, the poet invented a form— what he calls a *double sonnet*— one sonnet atop another, as a twenty-eight line poem, rather than a fourteen line poem. Precisely half the poems in Something Solid are double sonnets. The expectation horizon of twenty-eight lines is, or can be construed to be, radically dissimilar to the original mere fourteen. In twenty-eight lines, the *little song*, angled against intellectual expansiveness, takes on a new stripe as a vessel or vehicle more pliant, more nimble, more about widening parameters so that memory, sensuality, and drama, have a more adequate stage to perform, do their tricks on. The stage should then be both adequately lit, and adequately built to support their weight. Yet, the precision of the form— twenty-eight lines— renders some compression necessary, so that the traditional sonnet geist of willing confinement, enforced brevity, and the phenomenological tension which ensues, for both poet and reader, still stakes a claim and imposes that poetry remains poetry.

For Something Solid to transcend the merely tautological— poetry being poetry, long-established tropes within poetry digging in their respective heels to reestablish their subsistence and contemporary relevance— the combination of elements which inhere in the text must gather themselves together and travel, as if thrown with substantial velocity, to a unique gestalt locale. The locale, as a congeries of all its component parts, is crystallized, in miniaturized form, in Undulant, and in more representatively newfangled form in Frequencies— the charm, sense of transgression or danger (chaos and violence) thwarted, neutralized, or at least assimilated, and *frissons* built into a life, unconventional amidst all the conventionality, consecrated against bourgeois pursuits. The poet is not domesticated. Rather, in his travels, the pursuit is for the richness of flight, and the phenomenology of flight, travel,

as an end in itself. The poet, as an arrow flying through spaces at any moment enchanted or damned, is in love with the very principle of dynamism perpetuating itself. What gravitas is expressed, what objectivity is reached for, has to do with an understanding reached, through the composition of the book, what human life can offer to this form of consciousness, which craves a mien of the unsettled. Here's how motion or dynamism is achieved, here's how pieces may fall around it. The rogue poet is no one new, to be sure. This rogue poet is not attempting to be new, even if he is, often, inhabiting a new form. What he wants is a new kind of textual voyage, for himself, to mirror and ricochet against, and thus enhance, his fleshly, and cognitive, voyages.

Metaphysics of the Double Sonnet

The metaphysics of the fourteen-line sonnet are not particularly complex ones. Beneath the structural surface of meter, and prosody in general, the fourteen line sonnet both embodies, and represents, a wave on the ocean, and a manifestation of a wave-on-the-ocean dynamic. An impulsive complex in the poet's brain, mostly made, as tradition has defined it, of affective rather than intellectual material, coalesces to hurl itself into brief gestalt shape, as it crashes down in the produced "little song." A sonnet sequence, like Astrophil and Stella, takes the wave-on-the-ocean principle and makes of it a catalog of affective consciousness, an imaginative diary of moods. Shakespeare, Donne, Keats, Milton, Wordsworth, even, later, Edna St. Vincent Millay— all are voices employing the sonnet to index a unique form of sensation— first, the mood (lunar, tidal), then, the will-to-text embedded in the mood, encompassing the reach back to other indexes, other catalogues (especially Keats to Wordsworth and Shakespeare), gaining heft from evidenced histories, before giving way to actual liquidity, in the collision of text produced into precise fourteen line containers. Compression and brevity then seal the simplicity of a literary history which has a unique charm and charisma. This, because when executed skillfully, the wave-on-the-ocean effect creates a correlative sensation in receptive readers, who feel themselves buoyed up, then down again (to more ocean, or the shore), all with a sense of gracefulness and gratefulness that the poet has again moved a bit of water, which can be imagined as a synecdoche for the entire ocean of texts, or books. If the fourteen-line sonnet is a refutation of the discursive, it also dually offers itself to humanize literature, and, implicitly, discourse, with a purification of one kind of (affective) form or essence, against the excesses of the unlimited, of the boundlessness of possible cognitions, built into discourse, which purify discursive possibility in turn.

The invention of a genuine literary form is rare. What appears in the book Something Solid, and which I call a *double sonnet*— a twenty-eight line poem, one fourteen line sonnet on top of another— must, of necessity, manifest a more complex metaphysic. A wave-on-the-ocean, if it were merely to multiply into two waves on the ocean (two moods), would be redundant. Rather, what a double sonnet is attempting to accomplish is a larger ocean wave (still compressed, still brief), capable of moving in the direction of, even if not able to fully manifest, discourse, and the discursive or intellectual. The wave is built to rise higher, with greater authority, into the air, so that affect can reach around for other tools of the trade or craft— imaginative creativity (metaphor), prosodic effects, perspective shifts, bits of dialogue— and employ them in a redistribution of literary resources, so that the sonnet may take new ground. Now, the sonnet's sense of completion, and the correlative sensation of completion in readers, hinges to something new— a sense, in the middle of the double sonnet, of sitting on the crest of the wave for a few moments, opening up whatever view fits the poem's intentions and impulses. This means that, by the time the wave exhausts itself, the experience does not have to suggest, when interrogated, a paucity of interesting ideas. Rather, interrogation of the double sonnet is designed to reveal a slow-motion version of the original model, so that the reader can assimilate, interrogate, and re-imagine data as the poem itself is experienced, in real time. The metaphysics of the fourteen-line sonnet are then fruitfully complicated, and a unique, complex literary metaphysic is engendered.

To synthesize: are there reasons to prefer the original model? Yes— those who enjoy the game of extreme brevity, of seeing how much data can be compressed into a small space, how much velocity packed into a quick ride, may cling to possibilities inhering in fourteen lines. This extends, also, into the poetry crowd who fetishize tactility, materiality in general, the anti-cognitive. It is not just the original sonnet that holds up the proverbial cross to discourse; some forms of poetry, as an entire enterprise, do an analogous task. Keats, here, is an exemplar. What poetry represents a commercial pursuit follows this predilection through. For those otherwise attuned, who relish the idea and ideal

that poetry become attendant upon developed intelligence, the double sonnet should at least be an entity commensurate with the original model. By taking games cramped by tininess, like the *volta*, as initiated in Renaissance Italy (as, at the conclusion of the octave or the beginning of the sestet, a turn or twist is added to the poem thematically, as a point of emphasis), or Shakesperean or Petrarchan rhyme schemes, and replacing them with freedom to establish novel games, or just to develop whatever topoi are at hand, the double sonnet opens up a region of pure, unmolested literary promise: the strengthened wave, or the slow, sure wave (slow, sure mood), that can stand being freighted with the armatures and artilleries of the new century, and its array of possibilities. Neo-Romanticism manifest.

I. The Nineties

South Street

The girls Chris and I used to drive down
to South Street— Erica, Nicole, Dominique—
rights/privileges extended to us as Seniors—
I see now that, as usual, the glitter/grime of
South Street at night (Tower Records big red/
yellow sign shone as a talisman, consecrating us)
hid something darker, deeper, deadened
against our polite passes. As to what
world we might've woken to had we
known the truth then— I remember
bluster, braggadocio (who had who on back seats),
I also remember the suave sense we had
that these girls, callow as they were, were ours.
We could've used a brain-scanner, or a noose.

Elegy's Ends

Ren and Stimpy were two cartoon imbeciles
Kelly doted on. Late at night, I held her in
my arms as her idiot roommate snored, in
her first-floor room in Runkle Hall, and we
quietly sang along to the Ren & Stimpy
tunes issuing from her boom-box. So, thy
Kingdom Come: I'd left home, lost the monkey
on my back, moved on. Cheltenham was
done. Lansdale transplant Kelly to me instantly meant
that a vast, vital, genuine universe existed
and was available to me and my art: no boundaries,
no rules, no limits. Even Ren and Stimpy
sang out from the opulent side of excitement,
opportunity, adventure. The end of the elegies.

Not only were the elegies over, the warpage
around our young lives sent Kelly and I down
to the Runkle basement several times at that
time. We ostensibly hid from Kelly's aforementioned
idiot roommate, a big-nosed prig who used to
stick that nose in our, and her entire floor's, business.
But what we were actually doing, in those few, spare
carpeted rooms (sparsely lit or not lit at all), behind
closed doors, was making love. No locks on the doors
meant someone could bust in at any moment. We
were heedless. This was our only progress towards
solvency. The solvency it was, of the shared pursuit
of freedom. Adventure, also, thrown in there. No more
waking with a virgin's innocence— past Cheltenham, Lansdale.

Black Box

When theater-ace Terry trooped down that staircase
into the bowels of the Theater Building,
on the fringes of North Halls, I noticed
he (it seemed) felt nothing. For me, it was like
a plunge into empty nothingness, some
infernal realm of inversions; several
times I almost fainted. The Black Box
theater space was always mobbed on
those Thursday nights, not far from
midnight, where Terry reigned as secret
Outlaw Playwrights king— officious, daring,
beneficent or malign, as the mood took him;
and as Justine Caskey traipsed past me in the line,
vulpine teeth glistening in the fluorescence—

Justine, who we referred to as "Caesar Girl"
around North Halls, for making Caesar salads
for herself daffily in the dining commons.
I spent an uncomfortable few months obsessed
with Ms. Caskey, whose eyes stretched
lugubriously across a pinched, cadaverous
face. Was she a witch? Did she worship Satan?
Did she know who I was? Yet here, Terry
didn't think she could act, and that was all that
mattered. As I did my apprenticeship, Terry
decided I couldn't act but write. I began to
spew out one-acts, working my way assiduously
up the ladder to him. A dispensation of God-
like power— to see my work staged— was at hand.

Architecture and Levitation

The subliminal nature of architecture—
demonstrating, for the human brain, what
space is, how it might be saturated, without always
obtruding upon our consciousness— as I
drove around King of Prussia on those
brooding semester breaks, a subtle sense of
enchantment grew, hinged to what my
future might hold, as one who writes. King
of Prussia Mall, Tower Records, random
commercial strips with record stores, restaurants,
even the bus station where I was claimed
at the inception of the break, were all planned
and executed to manifest a sense of levitation,
and left my brain somewhere in the world Other, forever—

Beaver Avenue

Beaver Avenue featured normal businesses, bookstores,
record stores, art supply stores, coffeeshops, interspersed
with high-rise apartment towers, in which each apartment
came equipped with outdoor porch. That's how the festivities
on Friday and Saturday nights got ignited: inhabitants the Brits might
call *punters* perched themselves on their porches, beers prominently
placed in hands, to rubberneck as action passed on the pavement,
particularly girls. Beaver thus, pulsed with action. One achingly
cold night, towards the end of '95, was disrupted, when, as we
approached, my group scoped that a skirmish was breaking out between
a group side-walked and two stooges hogging a second-floor balcony.
My buddy Daniel was made vulnerable, insulted owing to a green tweed
winter coat. The whole street streamed with strange, uncentered life.
The key to it was that it was alive. Cubism or collage, college-style.

Silly Putty

Jennifer: a self-possessed, pixilated individual,
and the stigma of trailer-trash insignias inhering
camouflaged as lower-middle before my naïve eyes.
The pill she was purportedly on was more camouflage—
we bonded at the crotch like two young bunnies,
just for her to be a mother, just to make silken soft
the bitterness of a broken life in the sticks. Fortuitously,
she was stacked like a Playboy bunny, mad as a hatter,
and we refashioned class accordingly, like it was silly putty.
Yet a true-blue streak down her soul's middle meant
she took me, hungrily, to be her husband, and I responded
positively to all that rawness. She would have to meet
my family, I hers. For the length of a shotgun blast,
I was eternally hers to have and hold, as she wanted me.

Dosed

When everything, all perceptible fodder, shudders inwardly
with double, triple, quadruple meanings; every surface
seen is incinerated by a sinister beneath; it means a whirligig,
Tilt-a-Whirl, or scum inferno has been dosed into your brain.
It gradually dawned on me, as that summer unfolded, that
this had become my lot. The kids sharing my sublet were culprits.
Everywhere I looked, floods of flame could suddenly scorch me.
Cast down into illusory, carnival hell, I could only wait for time
to scrape the scum from me again. When I tried to eat, I
was unnerved by knives having their own aura— what they
represent to human flesh chimed out of them, malign. What I
was eating was shit. Even as, from the modest security
of a carpeted sublet floor on South Atherton Street, Jennifer's
conjugal life, and womanly livelihood, were assured—

The Scarecrow

He glowered at me, in my acid-cracked, demented dream,
from the front of the Strawser trailer, with disdain,
as if to spit, "I don't know who you think you are,
Mr. Field, but the place you're in here is the wrong one.
No one here marries outside the maze, the marriage
matrix we've made, and woe betide the marriage made
on the back of the two-backed beast. You thought
we'd be forbearing? That pitch-fork up your ass—
that's our forgiveness." He didn't need to say it twice— Jen and I
tried to make a reasonable case for ourselves,
failed, as the scarecrow sneered. I slugged sleeplessly
through several days of this, as Liverpool's cadets
collaborated with the scarecrow on a menacing
chorus. Jen and I would have to sing someplace else.

Season in Hell: White Candle

Once, if we remembered rightly, our life was
a feast at which all hearts opened and all wines
flowed. Now, we found ourselves reduced, as
the unmade bed in room 510 became a symbol
of disorder in our brains, separately and together.
This was our last stand, to and for each other— to
prove, beyond reasonable doubt, what forever
could mean to a boy and girl, partitioned first from
each other like Romeo and Juliet themselves, now
free from our clans to not accept our respective
conditions. Sleeplessly, we fucked living hell
out of each other, with desperate, animal
intensity, man and wife welded together in white
candle wax, singed into perpetual melt, resolved

into loose fluid. The web around you, Jennifer—
schemes, starvation—if they never knew the woman you
became there and then, in a hotel bed in State College,
amid summer throngs— you and I knowing would have
to be good enough (me taking twenty-five years to see
it), our bodies burning in Elysian fields. O witches, O
misery, O hatred, we entrusted nothing to you at all,
even as guns were lined up for our excoriation. Walled
in on all sides, you left it to me to demonstrate your
wifeliness to the world. I am not merely pleased to
do so— the white candle of our non-immolation
stands in a state of perfect and perfectly lit equilibrium
in the corn-fields behind what used to be your
trailer, the perfect image of our marriage, war—

September

There was a ruckus on campus— a young,
militant, girl cadet slaughtered someone from behind
a bush on the Hub lawn. The campus panicked
briefly, then settled back into stupefied stolidness. Word
went round that she'd been a waitress at the Diner;
I tried to remember if I'd seen her before. Jennifer
complained of abdominal cramps, nausea. It had
been decided— her family didn't like me. Yet we
continued to make love as though our siestas would
go on regardless. It would've been useful to know
then what I know now— Jennifer was dealt a pregnancy hand
which determined her imminent departure, from me
and State College, forever, of which I knew nothing.
As the heat held, our windows remained open: death and birth.

The Rustic Inscrutable

The pretty brunette with bag-edged eyes, stationed
(strangely) across from Jen in Leete Hall, revealed
herself, shortly, as another small-town siren. Carrie
and Jen were short with each other from the beginning.
Falling leaves found Jen disappearing from the campus
completely. The murky marriage, mud slathered on
a sawed-off shotgun, was finished. I slipped, with Carrie,
into nothingness and no-man's land. It was clear to me,
as beset by hollowness as I was, that Carrie and Jen both
knew some score, in a game hid under a mudslide from
me, but involving me nonetheless. I was a piece to be
moved from hand to hand— a shared asset, jinxed
from the solvency of understanding by the rustic
inscrutable, devoured in the maw of small-town America.

Something gloomy about small towns, small town
girls: macabre undercurrents follow them around,
amidst the farms, lakes, forests, extended foliage.
The grim reaper likes forests as much as cities,
and the naked flesh of small-town nubiles is as
Hawthorne'd as an even more abject Hester Prynne.
Cobwebs, soot, mud, grease, blood— it's all
smeared on the two-backed beast, when and if
it happens there. Now, it had happened to
me twice running— suburban, well-situated,
unused to being blood-drenched, ripe to hit
my head on rocks. Jennifer had made an abrupt exit
to cover the anguish. Carrie waited darkly, it seemed,
to be punished. I ploughed through fields, into deep water.

Trooper

A steep-ceiling'd, spartan, red-painted basement—
here's, down a flight of stairs, where La Tazza's front-
room led Chris and I. Clandestine it was from Cotton Street
and Main Street. We shook off the autumn chill, tossed
around by holiday festivities as usual on semester breaks,
and slurped coffee from our mugs. Whatever made us
irresistible to Jeremy's posse, provocatively attired in
army jackets, they shanghaied us into joining them on
a trek to one of their friends' Main Street apartment.
Jittery karma around Jeremy— he was, I later registered,
uncharacteristically quiet. Within this tribe, he was
a defeated, banished aristocrat, who had been kingpin.
The classic quality of his already-completed Nineties
body of work— its Villanova composition, by then, a militant memory.

I envision— Jeremy walks down Main Street. In his hands
is a copy of "d" magazine, which he hopes to consign anywhere.
Rather, he hopes to dump in the river, a few blocks
down. The fame he wants is fast, or nothing. He always thought
he would make it someday. If he doesn't, it's not his fault.
Perhaps he should move to New York, after all. Or teach,
tutor, bartend, give up the architecture routine. His brain is
a jumble of low and high. It's worth something to him, to be
big. Why starve? Why play pauper? It's true: unless he feels
royal, royally protected, he can't write. Main Street dead-ends:
it's ruthlessly midnight. When Manayunk would lead to
Center City, Jeremy was destined to find me, not
backing up military minded, circle-jerk shenanigans,
waiting in a coffee-shop, to get operational on poetry.

Defiance

The road is slick with moisture. If they hydroplane,
you can say goodbye to my own future life. Rather
more distressingly, they're both high, as she holds on
tight. Her long, slender arms make the necessary circle
around his ample waist; long, lank blonde hair blows
in the breeze. Yet she's quiet at Penn Crest, stubbornly resistant to
attempts to draw her out. She's his girl Friday more
than wife. Real marriage hovers in the future as
a homing beacon, against the ravages of too many
mob-related parties, intermediaries imploring her
to pipe down, climb on his loaded lap: her one and only.
Body/soul unity, as a possibility, haunts her uncomfortable
hours; ideals inherited from the Renaissance shake her
dope-addled brain. Statuesque, she carries a blown-glass bowl, rolling papers.

The most formal future comrade migrates from flat to flat,
the length of Manhattan; saved from school's repetitive
rigors, yet awkward against others more normal. As is
often the New York spin, there is no getting close. Kids
come and go. She's got the pluck, as is ascertained, to paint
what she wants. The most difficult forms (portal-ways, planar spaces)
flow easily out of her. She's then a weird, worrisome windup
doll to defy the feral, formless touch used to lighting up
the New York art firmament. She's a gem for someplace else,
not dust-binned yet, but close. Half-noticing, she also
imposes a posture of defiance on her life— tiny, half-dyke.
Day-to-day, the grind is to take the advanced forms, find
somewhere to migrate with them. The vision behind is crystal.
I dare to defy the motorbike, New York with paper piles, marriages. Right?

Nessy

Big motorcycle, big penis, big drugs (not to mention
big brains): the man who has, and is, everything— this,
for Mary, is the hero for her somewhere over the rainbow—
this is her Lord Byron. Neither John nor I could ever be
good enough. Mary is often quiet, but there is a monster
in her of awesome greediness that leers at the thought
she should submit to anyone but the mad, bad, dangerous
to know one, who reigns supreme in her heart. It could never
be spotted, she thinks, beneath all the mutable water—
her own personal Loch Ness Monster, of ferocious
appetite for every kind of experience. If I later came
to be a shadow-play version of her beloved, who was
(she never forgot) another January birthday, another
eccentric rebel, the best I could do was score as Keats.

Kill Or Be Killed

Mary, in her adolescence, instinctively chose an intensity
model for her life— to be an all or nothing kind of babe. What
possibility was simmering in her young brain, was a kind of life unseen in America
before— to paint, not just as another provincial American
mediocrity, weaned on provincial American trash, but a dweller
in the higher, thinner air of the most developed, Continental
kind of painterly formality. Yet not just formalism, as Philly
had got a foul reputation for, but art that bespoke of
the highest level of confessional honesty. Art that
completely and absolutely expressed a definite, distinctive
self. All this wrapped in a world which granted her all
the sex, drugs, and clothing a woman could want. If, that
is, you were like her, and refused to settle for what she
would deride as *declasse.* As when anyone among the very

set-in-rows human race attempts to do anything new,
stakes around this individual were very high to push all
those individual impulses out the window, and force timid,
contrite compliance. So when Mary ploughed through her
Nineties days, her house became an explosively powder-
kegged battlefield, where Mary fought to reach the shining beacon
of that liberated life she so deserved. The Harju house in
Media, three sisters and two parents, was on the class cusp
between middle-of-the-middle and upper-middle. It was
a semi-rich girl's house. Everything about the house reeked
of complete, totalized WASP normalcy, Republicanized
"family values," semi-devout (also) religiosity. Four bedrooms
on the big second floor, a living-room den and basement-den,
generically furnished, generically arranged. Kill or be killed.

Laird

Whatever interest you might have in watching
a mid-level rock band onstage in, say, vintage
film from the 1970s, and in whatever sense it
might be in the interests of justice to watch
the bass guitarist follow the lead and rhythm
guys into, say, *Smoke On The Water*, I would
like it to be known that because it happens to
be Mary's father with the Fender Precision,
any record kept of wars in that particular family
would need to duly note that said father was
more moderate than might at first be thought.
Try, again, to chart the journey from *Smoke On
The Water* to issues of God, carpeting, mutual
funds, acceptable tax evasions, unacceptable

tax evasions, acceptable moral lassitude,
unacceptable moral lassitude, and the rest,
and understand that in the end, a free-spirited
daughter, to the long-hair with the Fender
Precision, was not that much of a curse or a plague
on the house, even if her disruptiveness made his
days miserable, because, more than her mother,
he understands her. He had his years when he tried
to live as fully and freely as he could, and was then,
in expected fashion, coy about it, but if Mary got
out of that house in one piece, it's because a firm,
masculinized, restraining hand held back the two
major female assailants, the Me and the Mini-Me.
More than she could ever know, Laird was a secret friend to her.

Inheritance

Inheritance, in Mary's house, was a funny game. Money,
as usual in the suburbs, in the air, but also values, value
systems on offer. As a life in art, sex, and drugs beckoned,
Mary, as a child and early adolescent, could find little that
would sustain her. Laird and Bethany were not exactly Jesus-
freaks— they did not proselytize, and were restrained in how
they expressed their religiosity— this, including semi-impositions
at worst on their three daughters— but a Christian Right back-
bone was there, inhering. Mary's quirk— a sense of having
fallen in love with Jesus, first as a character in the Bible, then as
the subject of Renaissance art— was taken to be a source of
amusement to Laird, and a substantial "not to the point" to
Bethany, who waited for Mary to walk a certain chaste walk she
would've wanted for her. The chaste walk was a no go— Mary was

willful about charting her own course— but Mary's fascination
with Jesus never left her. Mary's Renaissance wholesomeness was
embodied, she felt, by Jesus, whose soul had to condescend to take
on flesh, or be made meat. The key point for Mary, which lit up
the Renaissance for her, was that the indissoluble bond between
flesh and spirit found its ultimate avatar in Jesus Christ. His body
was his soul, his soul was his body. The *Pieta* always brought tears
to Mary's eyes; Jesus left a beautiful corpse indeed. The soul could
never leave the flesh; matter contains, embodies, sustains the inanimate;
human flesh has the possibility of Holiness built into it, too. Mary
was not meant for renunciation, or mortification; but all her many
indulgences, including ones built into our own matrimonial bed, take
as a starting point the Renaissance ideal, starting from who Jesus was,
that an unembodied soul and un-souled body are equally unacceptable.

Sister Souls

Can it be that, even if the right concession is made—
the middle rides bitch— there is some luster to holding
up the fort, hemmed in on both sides? Whines on one
side, fisticuffs on the other. Mary was a bullying kid,
whose quietness at PennCrest was explicable because
as a freshman she was adopted by upperclassmen,
never recovered her wits. Grass, pills, and general
craziness didn't help. She was someone they could
play games with. Move down three grades, there stands
Ruth before us. Mary and Ruth had so much the same
soul, yet so many differences, too— *similitude in*
dissimilitude— Wordsworth didn't know the half of it.
Ruth, who would grow to the same height as Mary,
but ached, part of the time, with brunette practicality—

was not a *systematic derangement of the senses* kind
of girl, and the movement from Romanticism to Symbolism
takes us into their heart of darkness. As Ruth would say,
even at a young age, Ruth had *her* version of Romance, *her*
version of Symbolism, more grounded than her grandstanding
sister. The ferocity felt, of a need to express something real,
was there. Ruth, as a general rule, supported Mary's
exhibitionism in the house, against Laurie and the two parents,
because she knew her sister *meant it* about expressing
something in a real way. Yet, as the Nineties rolled towards
the Aughts, Ruth was caught in a maelstrom of aimlessness,
trying to weld practical instincts to creative impulses. Never
subordinate to Mary, always supporting her, but wary of
Mary's…a hem…*lifestyle choices*, too much a roulette wheel. Sister souls.

Consort, Concubine, Wife

Because she gave off the right, dire distress vibes, suggesting
willingness both to be rescued and commandeered, and because
her tallness and lankiness looked good next to him, John knew,
as a burgeoning goomba, that Mary would stick to him. She was
his own real estate. Symmetry, asymmetry— John and I were born
same year. All the same, I was never quite the high school goomba
he was. The eyes that scoped out the leggy blonde freshman had
also to acknowledge that his own physical bigness and burliness
needed to be balanced. John was both lucky and correct— Mary
did hate her home then, and was ready to reach for means of escape.
So there they stood, a siren and a would-be linebacker, but him
with unexpected sauce added when it was discovered that,
providentially for Mary, John was an art-connoisseur, an aesthete.
When not sifting through Waterhouse coffee table books, he used

his bulk to intimidate, as any dealer would, but didn't feel like taking
any shit for flitty idiosyncrasies. The Gothic starkness of his own
house had, again, an eerie sense of symmetry with me, my own
house by that time— a mother and son, alone. Cultured people,
the two of them, though John can't always hide that immersion
in drugs is high on his list of priorities. The John and Mary dance
is established— a semi-marriage, the consummation of which
happens in drugs, substances being dealt, the idiosyncrasies of
which involve art, and Mary's proclivity for painting which John
encourages. Even as he fucks with her faculties, night by night,
tossing things at her to take. Mary assimilates life among minions.
Mary and John are seldom alone. Her high position is undoubted.
The central vagueness of the situation— was she a consort, concubine,
or wife— stayed submerged in clouds of green smoke, as absolution.

High Ceilings

The frostbitten January night nuptial rites first fell to
Mary and I to perform— angled ecstatically as we were
against threadbare multitudes— depended, for its enfranchisement,
on us having emerged as semi-avatars at the big fleshly
discipline in the Nineties. My emergence was from State
College as a scamp, sub-scamp, or post-scamp; Mary's
route was more twisted. Experienced guys in drugs, who
had a sense of mercy for her as a painter, taught her the ropes,
brought her up to speed. The sense of anonymity around
her coming of age was clouded also by intoxication, by
associating the carnal with the clouded torpor of being high.
Yet Mary knew herself in a way womanly, not girlish, and exuded
familiarity with the rigors of mattress-thumped satiety She felt
she deserved conversance with ecstasy, well-roundedness. High ceilings.

Wake and Bake

On enfranchised mornings Mary and I set aside to be voluptuary— not too many, because even then we both had full responsibility loads— but nonetheless, Mary's eastern exposure window let morning sunlight in, and we could light up, feel like God's children. Our pagan or wiccan nature celebration consecrated our flesh to the flesh of the earth. If addition is made of carnality to my marriage with Mary, past what she had enjoyed with John, we could take the morning buzz, on the handful of times it happened that way, to such an absolutely lofty plateau of intense, formalized pleasure, that only Olympus could do us justice. Mary's status as adept at approaching pleasure as something formalized— a discipline— with tools, appurtenance items, tricks of the trade, regimens— was added to her repertoire of life-skills in the Nineties, through John. Whether still in Media, or in Amherst, where John was enrolled doing college work, Mary earned the right and privilege to manifest Heaven on Earth.

Home

The hook was baited, for the fish to understand
something hidden. However much Manhattan
basked in the media spotlight, as the center of all
cultural East Coast action, the portal-ways, planar
spaces, advanced compositions, heady coloration
schemes, which tumbled from her teeming head,
could have no home there. Manhattan, media
spotlight or not, had no recourse but to be dumb.
Inauguration beneath the surface to just that, the part
of life against stage-lights, but Abby simply had no
choice. She was a threat to an established cultural
order. No Byronic hang-ups like Mary, just a pair of the most
crystalline, kaleidoscopic eyes ever bequeathed to a human being,
forced to leave what had been her home. Broadway,

where she had served, proved to be no help. Musical
theater was third-world lechery, as was Manhattan itself,
so that the fish forced herself to flow into a new, foreign
city: stately buildings, no Broadway. The girls who were her
girls were everywhere. She hoped. And lucked out, because
crafting hands hammered the situation into a form sculptured
to please a fathomless appetite for queer life. No queerness
lacking in Philadelphia. Just the sense of a new kind of
flow, sense of order, hierarchy: permissions to be granted,
privileges to be earned. Always the thought that Manhattan
could be retreated into. Abby found that when she bit
down on Philadelphia, the planar spaces in her brain expanded
themselves into something epic, unprecedented, as did
a sense that compositions there signified solvency. Home.

Broad Street

You'd think Abby might've fallen in love with her
at first sight. Was Abby really the fall in love at first
sight type? Later, I was to learn: not really. Fierce life-
force energy, into giddy humor, different kinds of insanity,
but a cool customer nonetheless where her emotions for
other people were concerned. Still, it must've been
something at first sight— intrigue, a sense that the right
innuendo phrases around the right drugs were being used,
the right painters referenced, the right hinges also to interesting
guys (just to model for them, of course), the right Center
City mindset (like Manhattan, but warmer, realer, more human),
so that Abby was hooked on Mary in a cool five minutes.
Two rebels, also, against PAFA, against any imperative
dictating their art but the most honed, refined internal compass.

Indeed, Abby's with her, not threatened at all. Mary towers
seven annoying inches over her and is, as Abby learns to her
dismay, always in control of her appetite, so that a plump
Mary is unthinkable. But later that day, when the first communal
joint gets smoked, Abby feels Philadelphia fall into place
for her as no action-disappointment at all, Mary herself
a whirligig to pick her up, set her in a new place. It seems
inevitable to Abby that they become inseparable for a while.
When she sees Abby's work for the first time, it's Mary who
feels slightly threatened. What an eye! Undeniably genius in
her brain around spatial precisions, divisions. Even on
the first halcyon day, Abby's temper flares several times,
when already-controversial names are mentioned. A fireball!
The long, lean queen surveys the picture: no way out. Broad Street.

Continental

Maya, Saskia, Kristen— if you happened to be a girl
painter, and wanted to be in the shit the right way at PAFA
in those days, the right names were the right names. PAFA,
it turns out, were no shrinking violets about turning out
their version of ladies-of-the-night, and now Mary and Abby
were initiated into rites of passage in which obeisance was
done to the coven that ruled a bunch of campus roosts.
Maya, Saskia, and Kristen shared in common a sense of
worldliness, of knowing Europe; of having come from
the right kind of money to have done Europe and everywhere
else the right way; a conviction that Philadelphia could
work as a European city of note; and a sense of art that, like
Mary and Abby's, lingered on form as an agent of class
rather than an impossibility, as in Manhattan; a distaste,

as it were, for the formless. But beneath the surface ethos
of a coven destined to guiding light Mary and Abby's first
years in Center City, the real sense of class and distinction
was about drugs. Maya, Saskia, and Kristen would certainly
never reduce painting to a mere front; but at the end of
the day, when all was said and done, what they were dealing
was who they were. They attempted to deal, as Gaetan
later would, with the class and distinction of European dealers
in Philadelphia, and the ring of painters around them would
have to evince similar class for them to be happy. Mary and Abby
zoomed into view for them as two already-seasoned recruits.
Mary, leading Abby, wanted a line on coke, and got it. From her
first months at PAFA, she would hide bits of blow around her
studio, sneak off from anywhere for a secret gummer. "Continental."

Collage

As the blonde painter built towards a caterwauling
climax of charismatic presence, her brain constructed
itself all over again. Everything in Mary's past which
could be used to self-mythologize would be used—
that was taken for granted— but the tack taken was
about a jumble of dynamic elements, never needing to
coalesce into coherence, which would make her as larger
than life as she wanted to be. The unfathomable sense,
after this many years, of taking the raw materials Mary
employed and attempting to understand what was real, what
wasn't, can be easily replaced by understanding that grist
for the mill was grist for the mill for Mary then— anything
went. True dynamism meant that if half-stories became
full stories and vice versa, that was fine, as long as the whirling

dervish effect was achieved, manifesting the Mary-as-hurricane
she wanted to be. Whether her father really was a drunken
lout in private, a philanderer, or even a lover of his daughters,
no one really needed to know. The serpent of that story
unleashed itself, and then self-consumed. Mary as someone
who, in drunken and drugged stupor, had been hit by a car
somewhere near Media, also disgorged itself in the melee, along
with the sense of enfranchisement around being hospitalized
for general insanity. Mary had been propositioned by street-kids
in Spain; had trod the boards in Massachusetts as a professional
hippie, on a New England commune; had random sexual
encounters in sleeping bags in airports; ran away from home
several times as a teenager; was a pioneer in the discovery of
oxycontin; was an uber-electrical storm. The myth was a collage.

Credit

Some of the Nineties shenanigans I remain bemused by
are what Abby and I, as a kind of brother-sister duo,
forgot to do. Like learn to dress. Eventually, as I prowled
State College in black leather pants, purchased on a special
expedition to Center County Mall, I was following through
the dictum that my clothes needed to be not completely
boring. I even added a large, unwieldy Celtic Cross,
purchased on Beaver Avenue, for the same reason.
But, mostly, the plain jane reigned. That went also for
Abby, who was not called to dress any special way, and had
a way that stuck with her of just throwing on whatever.
Miss H was a different story, and cultivated a mentality
that her work as a painter could be consolidated and magnified
by her toweringly tasteful fashionista insight. Working with

what she had— long, thin, graceful limbs, no particular bust,
blue eyes mid-level blue, not pale, but larger than average,
sandy, lank blonde hair that made a whirling dervish package
deal of the whole enterprise of herself— she crafted a regimen
of possible selves, put them into motion. Preppie Mary, hair in
a bun, was a funny look for her, inverting her expertise in sex
and drugs, but showing off that the limbs still performed
the right way when packaged conservatively. The flower-shirted,
midriff-bared hippie or flower-child look, blonde mane loosened,
forced a lot of male animals to grunt, proof that she could get
around the tiny bust issue. When Mary would add a jade pendant
to an average outfit, or a sun dress, she was saying that it was within
her power to take the ordinary, make it extraordinary, if the pendant
was properly placed. You might or might not give her credit for it.

Installation

So, there we were in the years. As of four months
left in the century, I would settle in for a very long
stay in Logan Square. Abby and Mary, still in Center
City, had their eyes on rustic, scenic West Philadelphia
as a semi-permanent port of call. Who Abby and Mary
were at PAFA is determined by an understanding of
complexities which made PAFA's very existence
precarious. The image of PAFA to Europe was sanguine.
Europeans had no problem with painters learning,
employing form, painting with discipline, rather than
the formless Manhattan meandering which made necessary
Abby's escape. But the East Coast media found form, any
artistic form, corny, & as of the turn of the century,
the *kill the country with stupid culture* press-game was still operative.

Thus, PAFA was split between affiliations, down lines which
suggested rocks, hard places. The solution for PAFA, as of
the century turning, was to demonstrate for the media
compliance with their all-consuming, stomach-turning
kill game, by granting prizes, favored status at PAFA
to students working in the disciplines Abby and Mary
thought dumb, and corny right back— installation art,
videos, conceptual gestural art, anything but real painting.
So that, Abby & Mary were true hipsters at PAFA about
drugs, but forced to settle for mid-level status as students,
while the installation crowd got the prizes, plaudits.
Abby, in particular, whose raw sense of painterly giftedness
outweighed the entire institution, including Andrew Wyeth,
was none too pleased, but her life was a fast-moving train. Move on.

Scorecard

Amusing, after many eternities, to write a scorecard of
similarities and differences for Mary and Abby. Amusing,
because the one being skinny but huge, strapping, the other
abbreviated, made them obvious non-twins, non-siblings.
In many ways, and as would be expected, Mary was more
straightforwardly womanly than Abby was. Part and parcel of
Mary's womanly wiles was the sense of mystery built into
everything she did. Mary was, indeed, difficult to fathom,
fathomless, and combinations of pointed remarks & silence
conveyed for her what she wanted, in any given situation. Was
Mary mistress of herself? Her mysterious amours worked,
then, before I was on the scene, to create a sense that
everything about her was eroticized. Was the small bust
a guy-deterrent? Not on your life. Mary actively employed

her hips, legs, flanks, and not infrequently bared midriff, to create
an impression of intrigue, womanly mystery. When she wore
midriff shirts in summertime, an occasional besotted pedestrian
would stop in the street. She had it. Yet whatever action was
there, whoever she was seen with (and she was seen with many),
all outward hints were a strain to hear, passed *sotto voce*. I was
later to learn, that Mary alone, even as spouse, still thrived on
the intrigue, the spookiness, of mystery, of leaving things unsaid.
Mary's sense of drama was cloak and dagger, and the sense of
peripeteia, for her many lovers, was an engorged one. Yet Mary
was bewitchingly about parts— physical, emotional, psychological—
that knew how dances of the flesh worked, only too well.
When she was in harmony with herself, emptiness & fullness
cojoined in her in rapture, ecstasy. The painting-brain mystery was Abby's.

The Ecstasy

If you fast forward to it, as a remote vision of
human happiness that was granted to us then—
Mary and I hold hands, laying on my living room
floor, read Donne's *The Ecstasy* to each other—
not to mention the extermination of physical
boundaries which followed our recitation—
you can find the root of it, in both of us, from
a sense of entitlement about our lives, which
meant that whatever was ours to have and hold,
would and could become inalienable to us. In other
words, a sense of the tenacious around the idea of
achieving any type or form of ecstasy we might be
able to. We both, subconsciously, prepared ourselves
for each other by being unwilling to stint ourselves.

The womanly part of Mary, past and around the sublimity
which animated the creative sectors of her brain, already
had so much of Jennifer in it— the flame-headed sense
of liking the different, the new, the bizarre— the desire
for complete, totalized sensory immersion in an ecstatic
present— the passion for the experience of ravishment,
including willingness to submit to a man, however humble,
to make it happen— but above all a sense that was simpler,
of seeing what you want in the world and taking it, dammit.
Jennifer christened me ready for Mary. John, of course, was
hardly a doppelganger to me. No physical resemblance, but
another daredevil, another holy flake, another would-be
artist, and another sense of entitlement around the simple
issue *to thine own self be true*. The ecstasy, past lust, chiseled into us.

Patrol

It was too low or too high for me for it to be that,
by my junior year of high school, mid-evening could
find me already with a pot buzz on. Junior year was,
in fact, a deranged congeries of worthless elements
making it so that I was desperate to escape my day-to-day
life very much. I had gained a bunch of weight, was doing
poorly at school. It would have to be that the self-salvaging
came later. It did. That night, however, I floated aimlessly to a party
in Elkins Park, in a house at the top of the hill behind
Sousan Pharmacy, Elkins Park Square across Old York Road.
It was amusing to see how N. reacted to stoned Adam—
laughing at me at the wrong times, not understanding
that it was not her grandiloquence, or Zen mastery
of my psychology that made me skittish, but just the fact

that I had cannabis rattling around in my brain. I was sitting
in an elongated window casement at the front of the house,
facing away from Old York Road. I looked over at the front
door incidentally, and John and Mary were standing there,
watching Cheltenham heads of state hold court. They were
almost certainly stoned, too, as PennCrest representatives
moving forward to extend their domains. John, of course,
was older, my age, and the leader. Mary, his lanky blonde
consort, was quiet. Yet, after all this time, and after all is
said and done, somewhere in the universe there is a sense
of bemused satisfaction that when Mary and I made eye-
contact for the first time, we were both wasted. I wound
up in a troupe of idiots that night (dead of winter), patrolling
the borderline between Elkins Park and Wyncote. Domain redefinitions.

Marathons

For burgeoning degenerates, as I was then, it was
interesting to learn, my cleaned-up senior high school
year, that a well-run cross-country race, however
excruciating, also delivers an eight-hour heroin buzz—
runner's high. Over at PennCrest, Mary was already
busy running track, rather than cross-country, at which
she excelled, even as it forced her to eat entire dinners,
and even desserts. We were already, without knowing
it, an odd couple, each as odd as the other, because
the zig-zag of high school athletics to European classicism,
and hyped-up athleticism to drugged lethargy, was built into
us, hard-wired, by (also) a Philadelphian and American society
tolerant enough to let us go our merry, mold-defying, not locked-down
way. Where the running showed up later, right in the middle

of things, is in the sense of fitting right in to the physiology
of the big city, making an easy adjustment, as it were, to
Center City, being able to handle city-life without looking
back. Days that ran on and on, into nights which also ran
on and on, were fine for us. The stamina we needed was
there. Where Abby amassed the same stamina-energy is
anyone's guess. Even in the vaunted recreational sport
of communal marijuana smoking, on and on we raced,
bowl after bowl, spliff after spliff. Skinny as a rail, interesting
also to learn that Mary took up a lot of space. She was big.
Those long, graceful limbs cleared a substantial path around
her, so that the space she needed was her own. And, coyness
aside, the on and on was true for us in bed, too. All of which meant
that the days and nights we had together were not brief. Marathons.

Harrisburg

I'd always noticed the pronounced, large squareness
of her forehead, giving her a thoughtful (philosophical?) look. Then,
the cascade of black waves, thicker than average neck,
medium build. Tall— strapping, even. She paced in
front of me, my cheap luggage, as blistering sunlight singed the Harrisburg
bus terminal, without acknowledging me directly. I
knew for a fact— she was not an undergraduate at PSU.
She could only have been here, in Central Pa, tracking me.
The years of my childhood and adolescence in Cheltenham,
she'd been an indifferent presence. I had, as I well knew,
been a reprobate to her and her kith and kin, but for
abstruse reasons. As of this summer day, I continued
not to care. Except to say, that the School District
and its minions should have known better, belabored zero into sub-zero—

"as if, Adam; as if I had any idea how to handle
you, or us, or what Cheltenham had turned into
by then. You: always special, always different,
always such a fierce disruption against our lives.
Remember— I never liked you much anyway.
There's no room for special people where I
come from. What's special is the order of
who gets placed where when, and why. So, as I
followed you out that stupid door, it's with
no special anything. Philosophy? Where I
come from, it's this: where you come from is
who you are, whether you like it or not. You
were lower than us, lower, and still are, you little shit—
and that luggage you had was pretty cheap, wasn't it?"

Jenkintown Bar

The darker, dust-binned depths of the Philly 'burbs—
an expectation, from those who knew who I was, that
I be in rough, over-shifted shape. I sipped at a Cuba
Libre, oblivious, only noting that semester breaks usually
managed to avoid the delirium tremens of my CHS years,
but not always. A Parliament Light sat in the table's ash-
tray, as dagger-looks were hurled in my direction, which I
attempted to return as evenly as possible. Chris and I
sat there, secluded in Jenkintown off of Old York Road,
and I picked up the cigarette and finished it, smearing
the butt with great deliberation. Chris was positioned
to fall back on the sangfroid of one hype on a possession
vibe. He owned the place, for him; I disowned the place, for me.
His mostly-finished beer made a claim for himself I couldn't make.

Amenity

In a world in which all are permanently beset,
an amenity is an amenity is an amenity. Incredible,
how charmed it was to wade in the warm waters
(currents, undercurrents) of The Coffee Cellar,
walk-down wedged, with a pizza parlor, beneath
a side-street connecting College and Beaver. The Cellar
had the audacity, in select circumstances, for select
attendees, to offer goo-balls over the counter. Whatever
a goo-ball is now, then it was this: hash baked into
a ball of raw, hand-hardened cookie dough. Efforts
made, the goo-ball's slow-burn magic carpet ride offered
fantasies fulfilled, for heady college town residents,
especially on temperate nights in spring, autumn.
Would-be seer of visions I was, I perceived no insolence.

New Year's Eve

Youth's privilege is to be in love with life.
I was in love with life that night, too— the crush
of strange kids in a white-painted, unfurnished Abington
bungalow, movements made by us towards more weed.
We sat on a curb outside in the frost, planned more
mischief. Then, someone else's wood-paneled porch,
weed introduced, clearly laced with Benzedrine, to move
us up a few more notches. The whirligig around Chris
and his Abington crew never faltered, on the road to
that systematic derangement of the senses I told Chris
so much about. The night's volta was just me back in
the family kitchen again at five a.m., ploughing through
several bowls of breakfast cereal. I then slept for three
days, not yet wise-ass enough to know what I'd celebrated.

Central Pennsylvania

My young writing life: a solitary hike up Kilimanjaro
(apprentice, as I was, to no one specifically). I wrote
and wrote until Kilimanjaro was scaled, Mont Blanc,
and Snowdon. The graciousness of State College
revealed itself in sublets: South Atherton Street, West
Nittany Avenue. I surveyed my papers, which for me
were drenched in the ecstasy of tears, terror, and tremors
transcended; and charted Central Pennsylvania as a mighty
mind— a million shades of green. For a few months, this
little college town was representatively, legitimately my
possession. I consumed College Avenue as though
it were nitrous, my diploma made of universe, or the heaven
of poetry's gravel-paths. Much of me would remain where
this breakthrough occurred, could never change. Nature's way.

Shotgun Kiss

Party swirling around us in waves, there it was:
a shotgun kiss. I had no rejoinder but to say thanks.
Arcane, what you'd done, with other kinds of
shotguns, to allow it to happen, my dear. To find
out, an eternity later, that you were writing too,
shuttling back and forth between countries, over-
extended enough that publication had to be a non-
thought— I never need doubt you were a tragedy
(suicide blonde) foisted on everyone, without anyone knowing.
The Outlaws were clueless in your direction, as was I.
Were you a Ruth, or a Tammy? Everywhere you
looked: blood, dirt, feces, dope, pockets full of nothing.
As an editor-to-be, you knew me as a layaway plan.
The overlap of two mouths: effectual blowing of smoke.

Perfect

The poster of Monroe, dousing herself in
cologne, was you, yourself, again— had to
be perfect, as you said; as Jennifer was you,
yourself again, perfectly, as didn't need to
be said, couldn't have been anyway, then.
I imagine you, wandering down to that dank
basement, with a sense of symmetry in your
brain about what had been, would be. By
the time it was time, your hair had darkened,
but the core of you remained bright, as bright
as it had been in the house on South Atherton
Street. It was your turn to cut down the middle,
offer up your vision of perfection to a man who
appeared to you more than a curiosity— sharper.

The shock of making love amid a sea of paper,
piles upon piles— my own vision of perfection
had arrived, on the wings of the Symbolists, as
they were me, myself, again, etc. The space we
were able to inhabit that autumn, a from-here
armistice season against Hell, couldn't last, but
we didn't need it to. Rather, if we cut into each
other at the right angles, a fossil shell imprint
would be left on State College, & the whole world;
pungent, starkly ravishing enough to last our
own un-warped version of forever. So it has
been for me. As to where & what you cut down
the middle of, as we speak— we'll see if I'm
pure enough to know anymore, Emily. Maybe.

Emily's Voodoo

Emily's voodoo: an invocation of lascivious
lawlessness, a garden of secret green. From my
second-floor sublet on West Nittany Avenue,
I'm sure she looked out at autumn State College
with a mystical sense that her spell was being cast:
hydrochloride pot, cigarettes, and the rest that was
her, splayed out in a posture that, somewhere, she
had already mastered. The spell was against all
the run-in-circles crew, "sororisluts," footballers,
frat-packs, the anti-human, anti-humane. What
sutured our skin together ripped them to shreds
in Emily's mind, cast out from my black mattress.
In State College, the playbook of human savagery
against raw reality was ornery, but could be contravened.

To Happy Valley

The State College townie kids, bound
to Happy Valley, got their kicks where
they found them, gave off an air of
ennui shot with doom (human life
having granted them no escape valve),
yet were accommodating to me. On
what it means to look around a small
town, and know that it is everything to you,
encompasses all you are, Lords over you
confining curses: to trip with these kids was
to understand these limitations, the magic
and the agony. Lisa smirked, skinny in her boots,
hair cut short but for the one fringe over
her left eye, and passed me water for the E high—

Lisa— after twenty years, the bathroom,
you remember, in The Coffee Cellar,
was all black, with a wide mirror.
Stoned, I dragged you (sweet sixteen) in there
to see if I could kiss you, wrapped in
black leather pants; you banged in
two-inch-high boots, tawny hair-fringe
there, over your eye. I got the kiss; we ambled
out hand in hand; wound up back in
again. You made me vow to you
something I can't remember. How
townie girls talked— I'd nod, get lost.
But the womb-space was complete—
we were safe, ascendant into space, hopeless—

Elsewhere

It seemed simple to me then, to master the deals
system simmering in Washington Square Park. Eye-contact,
held or withheld, was the most essential signal; and who
stood where. Mastering said system meant that if I
wanted to score a twenty-bag, at any time, I could.
The action around Washington Square Park was
pretty lowly stuff; my entire life in Manhattan turned
out to be pretty lowly. Rather than a small, cozy
college town, what we had here was a fiery furnace,
a big, ugly juggernaut, eagerly ripping anything or
anyone to shreds whose ass wasn't completely
covered, amid the grotesquerie of enormously-
built ugliness. I somehow managed to salvage for myself
a bedsit in Park Slope, Brooklyn, after crashing for

a while on the Upper West Side, and in the East Village.
My meandering day to day life, between looking for
straightforward work, looking for work in theater,
trying to get published, and haphazardly recording
music, was a narrow tunnel, over the course of that
year, and if I was going to survive, it wasn't here. I
found Manhattan, mostly, to be Deathsville. One day that spring,
I was doing my usual park prowling routine, and someone
was following me. She sat on the bench, on the perimeter
of the park, to see what I was doing. She would've noted
I was even skinnier than usual. My eyes, round and brown,
reflected a side angle that tilted slightly to reveal them
as loopy, alien-like. Could be painted. The life-force energy
was still there. This boy, another artist like her, had a future. Elsewhere.

Credits

Art Recess 2: "High Ceilings," "Elsewhere"

As/Is: "Black Box," "To Happy Valley," "Silly Putty"

Monday Journal: "Trooper"

The Argotist Online: "Silly Putty I"

Otoliths: "Black Mattress I" "South Street," "Architecture and Levitation," "Harrisburg" (earlier draft), "Perfect"

PennSound: "Perfect," "Architecture and Levitation," "Season in Hell: White Candle," "To Happy Valley"

P.F.S. Post: "Season in Hell: White Candle," "Home," "Defiance," "Nessy"

Tears in the Fence— "Jenkintown Bar (earlier draft)"

II. Aughts Philly

The Painter

The compact red book I ran around with:
Crowley's Book of the Law. I was goaded
into knowledge that a reckoning was at hand.
An archetypal Goddess had manifested as
a tactile reality in my life. An image had been
seared into my mind; a painting called *The Vessel*;
it was hers, and yet I was a married man. The only
path forward that tempestuous autumn of '01 was to
cheat. The book laid down a gauntlet of what
it meant to act in the world with a genuine sense
of destiny; to be a man who had the mettle to be
a real force of nature. She knew, my wife, that I
had been possessed, and that winds were blowing
me in a new direction, towards the forbidden.

I had, it seemed to me, no choice. The night I
spent with the painter, in a studio in PAFA, I
discovered what it meant to have a hinge to
true will about matters of the heart. She kept
paintings there, of Dionysus and Apollo, and she
would make me a myth, too. We shared red
wine that had the effect of being blood between
us; our chalice was the air, the sound of water
pipes late at night in an old building, darkened
corridors meant to hold only us, bathrooms
which could be used as portal-ways into starry
worlds. As I gathered steam, I felt the book
hover in the air as well, a piece of text writ in
boiling blood, pummeling towards spring.

The Studio

The vista which then opened was one I never
could've anticipated in the Nineties— the PAFA
campus was set as a series of jeweled buildings
smack in the center of Center City Philadelphia,
a few blocks from City Hall. Mary was then still
in enough good standing to maintain her own
studio on campus. I had to sign in as a guest on
the ground floor every time I visited. The room
was a large rectangle, and the elongated back wall
was one big window, looking out on the western
progression of Cherry Street, towards Broad. Until
Mary and Abby, I had no fixed notions of painting;
now, I dived in with the frisson of one let loose in
a wonderland. Everything about Mary was magical

to me, and the canvases arrayed around the studio,
largely male nudes, recumbent or not, plugged into
Mary's fascination with classical mythology, and made
a case for Mary as a Don Juana, a seducer of men.
Heady stuff, and often Mary's tales were about men
who had posed for her. Vertiginous, but I was on
the verge, nonetheless, of a full-on love affair, maybe
marriage, to a women powerful enough to be called
a Creatrix, a female goddess in the world, and I knew
it. Sleeping with Mary meant something it never could
with others; rather than a mere palliative, if you could
get her to put out in the studio, you were plugging into
a mythological web, glistening and intricate, stitching
yourself, possibly, into history, and the come was in colors—

Riot Grrrl

Prize partridge around Media, Mary was also a bad
seed or rebel par excellence. She doped and fucked her
way in divergent directions; got dropped into hospitals;
rode with her assumed husband on a motorbike;
in the parlance of the times, granting complete credulity
to her tales, a wilder riot grrrl never drew breath.
What mattered to me was whether I had her or not.
This remained variable, as Abby also appeared, and both
of us caught viable action on the side. One summer night,
after a brief, mutually adulterous separation, she arrived
by cab to Logan Square, in frilly dress, hair in a bun.
I grabbed her and fucked her on the floor, and that (somehow)
was it— marriage consummated. Even if Mary moaned about
my drug shortages. Love always seemed richer, to her, on Klonopins.

The only one who ever drove me into delirium fits
with jealousy, Mary was. She was adept at being
a little lost sheep, for anyone (curator or not) to salvage
and rescue, if I had displeased her even for a night.
The only one who ever made me weep from pure
obsessive anguish, so that so much of my life became
dramatic, I might as well have been back with the Outlaw
Playwrights. I knew now how to evaluate compositions,
the quirks of colorations, what the Renaissance taught
us about body-soul unity; more importantly, for me, I
knew what body-soul unity meant when an individual
falls in love. I cannot say, the only one I was ever in
love with; but my deepest sense ever was, of love running
in red blood through my veins, out of my pores, into her.

Starlight

Maybe its because October nights on the East
Coast can still be sultry; it was still reasonably
early, 10:30; us three in our usual semi-stupefied
lethargy got a rush of energy, decided to take a walk
over to Fresh Grocer at 40th & Walnut, get some
grub, often in short supply at 4325. I got French bread,
Mary got vegetables for stir fry, for Abby too,
and as we walked home what awaited us was little
we didn't want. We were too stoned to be self-
consciously anything, but you can bet we were
stared at, with our symmetrical features, sculpted
cheekbones, and yet West Philly had glitter all over it
because everybody hit the street simultaneously,
we walked, levitated with everyone, and everyone levitated with us—

the house party a few nights later was beyond
levitational. Every young painter in Philly crowded
into the lived-in, yellow lit kitchen to do whiskey
shots, and drove a bunch of points home about how
the city was now working together, firing off on all
cylinders at once, even as Mary abstained, as usual,
from alcohol, which took her nervous system and trashed
it. The painters were obliging about the poet's participation,
as laughter ricocheted into the grassy backyard area,
with its rusty fence, small concrete plots, placing us
in a city space with real green in it, even as trees
began to yellow, and as the warm weather held.
When the door to Mary's room shut an hour later,
we took the starlight in with us, painted and owned it.

Live Forever

We had it then— not just the embedded depth
of soul love, but glamour right on the ground,
as the formation formed by which Mary and I spent
all of our nights together. Our route— West
Philly to Logan Square and back— took two
disparate locales, made them whole, out of
a sense that they were meant to be wed, just
as we were; Logan Square with its sleek, modish
urbanity, West Philly with its rusticity, climbing
ivy, plus the obvious inversion of a well-worn
media cliché against it. By New Years Eve, 2003,
there was so much gaiety in the air, we'd pierced
a hole in the obdurate, obtrusive surface of human
life, to find ourselves in a tropical paradise—

I relate to it, now, as a clear demonstration that
Heaven on Earth happens. In Abby, we had a soul
sister; in the large co-op twin on Baltimore Ave.,
a safe haven; my flat in Logan Square created
a different, representatively recent kind of stage;
all were playgrounds where the dope, pills, every
thing else was shared by all, as all of our bodies
were for each other and no one else. The profound
ecstasy of that New Years was that a bunch of
artistic misfits found ways and means of being
completely at home in the world, against constraints
that needn't have been there, with a serene sense
of what it might mean to live forever. We were
right, then and there, to be who we were, and we knew it—

Genius Loci

West Philly swung, night by night, around all of us.
I couldn't not notice— Diana was delicately gorgeous.
She spent lots of time in the room next door.
One night, deep into the wee hours, and as
the entire house tripped (taken off, it
seemed, into distant universes, sucked into
black holes, or even flipped the switch into
primordial ooze and chaos), I swung dumbly
into Kevin's open door, found Diana tripping
on the bed, in tee and panties. As I sat down
on the bed, all that occurred to me was to
follow my instincts. The *genius loci* of that
place and time was all about nothing else,
and the sense that Diana, whose elegant lashes

and sculpted cheekbones belied her wildness,
existed as an archetype I came to worship
at the shrine of, even as music roared from
down the wood-floored hall, Mary and Abby
slept on the other side. I ascertained, later,
Diana, who I hadn't known before, had changed
her name, to stake a claim, against missing other ladies'
fun. She would become an arriviste for me, later,
also, once the two stalwarts were out of the way.
Hopefully, foggy memories would make me hesitant
to claim knowledge, more than stunted, of her
bellicose, venom-bordered insides, of a stunted child,
Lolita as painted by Goya. Lolita painted by Goya,
however, is still Lolita. Nothing child-like in that wildness.

Quicksand

I can't imagine Jenny having small, still voices anyway—
voices of conscience, for example— Jenny was too hung up
on devilry to house or maintain them. Jenny liked being a punk
and a devil. If you gave her a brain-scan, for the fifteen-minute
interval I was in her here— her being Diana, being Mary's
housemate, mine part of the time, too— how I imagine her
brain moving is its own scan of the tactile around her. I was
mostly likely wearing a blue or green Fruit-of-the-Loom tee-shirt.
Good hygiene. Able to take the signal sent— her lounging half-
naked on the bed, alone, in the early morning, with no one around.
The door, of course, being wide open, so maybe Mary could walk
by and see what was going on. Us, both, she would know, being
stoned. But, to cut right down the middle, what Jenny had in her
brain, other than the Bible and Renaissance, and that flashed

against Mary's preoccupations no matter what— the Bible seems
to have been, for Jenny, a vision of her native Maryland as a collection
of retarded infants. The Nativity would then become a collection
of bloopers, bleeps, and practical jokes performed by said retarded
infants. I pumped away at her as my own kind of retarded infant.
The Renaissance ringleaders, for her, were stalwarts against the Italians—
the Spanish Masters. The crazy, spooky, dusky earth-tone troupe.
Body-soul harmony replaced by bile, crud, filth, but also a strange
kind of truth-telling about the human race, that the Renaissance
never dares. The ultimate, enfranchised reality of the grotesque.
So, Jenny gets laid by her house-mate's husband, who, she knows,
feels entitled to do the task, owing to said house-mate's transgressions.
Jenny is not herself, exactly, as this happens. The open door has them
walk Goya's tight-rope. Jenny tells the truth more than Mary does. Quicksand.

4325 Baltimore Avenue

Jason cooking flounder on a filthy range, having picked up
the fish at Fresh Grocer at 40th and Walnut, where Penn
students mingled with artists, subversives, bums, and mothers—
we, at Fresh Grocer, often carried out French bread (two
bucks) for moonlit walks home down rustic, mansion'd streets.
Mary enjoyed cooking pesto pasta dishes, Olive-oil goddess,
she'd make a pot on pot while a group of us, including Abby,
watched movies in the lived-in, downstairs living room.
Paintings, Mary's evocations of Dionysus and Apollo as heart-
rending hunks, Jason's post-Dali, post-structuralist Dada
and Derrida-derived violences, favored by PAFA judges,
and all housebound originals flecked with little chips from
the falling ceiling, leaned on the wall. The sense of West
Philadelphia being dangerous was not with us. Parties on the green-awning'd

porch, weed midnights—butt-smoke, frost-breath, gun-
stocked West Philly cops stop to shock us with looks as
we loiter, amused. They'd never see me upstairs with Mary and Abby,
smoking all night, doing deeper-to-higher meditation exercises
from bowl to bowl, sinking up into the stratosphere,
establishing depth and weightlessness at the same time,
creating and doing grooves that worked for all of us.
None of us were ever more loose. One time on whiskey Mary's
diaphragm got stuck inside her and I felt it, fucking her. We
laughed, Mary's long, raucous hair then down to her ass.
Golden apogee— everyone hot— everyone fucking,
painting, making music, boozing, drugging, sucking, humping,
leaning on nothing but the night's promise, our nexus the nexus,
our moment the moment, all now reduced to a fiery memory—

Fridge

For all that 4325 Baltimore Avenue was a hothouse
ambience, generating all the action a young artist could
want, the fridge was a hovel. The lordly sense of warm
entitlement, to graduate from a serious matrimonial bed
down the due-right set of stairs from Mary's room, all for
a midnight snack, was thus undercut. What you would see
when opening the refrigerator door— two-thirds a salami,
tin-foiled only halfway, or an uncovered bowl of half-eaten
pasta salad, along with Mary's more staunch, more solid Brita
pitcher, then desert terrain, of the grungy, grimy kind—
bespoke of the vicissitudes of Bohemia, taken out to
the Nth. I learned to bring my own snacks, and Mary's
Brita-water was fine as accompaniment. The due-left
set of stairs from Mary's room, where, when she had

finally konked out, a combination of pot and matrimonial
exercises rendered her useless until the morning, led down
into the foyer area at the front of the house, where new
arrivals could be heard banging around at all hours. I seldom
ventured down those stairs in the middle of the night. It
seemed to me that the politics of the house favored me in
Mary's room with her, even when she was rendered senseless.
The kitchen was nonetheless loose enough, that if I showed
up after midnight, no one minded seeing me in my boxers.
All of this was precocious of all of us— we celebrated, from
that fridge on out, a new America, a cultural America that
soared past what had been imagined before. The bawdy, boisterous
level of the celebration made victory seem like a fait accompli. But,
to make a crude pun, our salami was only half tin-foiled then. Time would tell.

Lull

Attendant on the mystery— that a house could exist for us,
where we all felt at home, us misfits— is the inevitable dark
side of the equation. I could never get any writing done at 4325.
Mary, Abby, Diana, were all too distracting, not to mention
Zooska, the loquacious house-cat, who would often settle on
Mary's bed when we had parties in her room. In fact, the entire
period of the early Aughts is marked, for me, by a sense of
indeterminate writerly infertility. The big creative surge I'd
experienced, towards the end of my time in State College, I'd
knocked down what walls were in my way, put up my own
new architecture. The cocktail of what in my head stood behind
that writing— the Symbolists, the Beats, also several years of
philosophy coursework at PSU, including the Continental jaunts
they were famous for— didn't need the later elixir of English

Romanticism to establish its own fertility. Within its own modest
parameters, it allowed me in text to be the Rimbaud I wanted to
be. That— a variant of Rimbaud's punkish adolescent— is the persona
which manifested in State College. I had the wherewithal then to
follow it through. Seasons in drug-hell fed the flames the right way.
By 4325, this had graduated into an awkward transitional period.
The discovery of Romanticism as a wellspring I found less instantly
useful than the Symbolists. It was no longer appropriate to wear
the mask of a bratty, if visionary, adolescent anymore, either. I
was stuck. What bled out of me, during the early years with Mary,
was miscellaneous. Mary's literary conservatism meant that what
she looked for in poetry was lyricism. So, I wrote lyrical strophes
to her. The electric charge into vital action came later— received from
plugging into the international English-language avant-garde. This was a lull.

Oafishness

Cresting onto the wave of the present, the specter subsists
of who we are, who we have been. We travel endless eternities
to get back to the square one— this is who we were, and more
importantly, this is how we were seen. Mary, who painted me
as Michelangelo's *David*, saw me as him— naked, raw flesh,
handy in bed, but rough around the edges, impulsive, and eager,
in an oafish way, to sleep with as many women as I could. All
these eternities later, looking at Philadelphia in the Aughts, I am
unable to say that the raw, naked meat part of me was not
motivated by the crass impulse to prove my viability in the world
by racking up conquests, as though all the bed-hopping were
a sport, and I a detested vulgarian by taking a game she played too
out to the Nth of complete excess. If, nonetheless, the whole
thing is to laugh, it is because I never, then or now, found Jesus,

his eagerness to mortify his senses and thus enhance his spirituality,
that interesting. The clumsy oaf who would stumble into the next
room and fornicate with Jenny, herself an oaf of crafting wickedly
and mischievously undetectable appearances, likes to think that
these games are all towards the good, and that the expansiveness
of raw meat, taken out to the Nth, is simultaneously an expansion
of consciousness. If Jenny and I left the door open, out of naïve
trust or just oafish dumbness as usual, there remains that space in
human reality that stands on the precipice and just jumps— like
The Fool in the Major Arcana of the tarot deck, who has Holiness
against Jesus in headlong momentum towards the crazy wisdom of
real, tactile experience, we wanted to see what could happen next.
What happened, from 2026, is that the world is onto our games
and our conflicts. They care. Oafishness is an interesting religion, too.

The Young and the Restless

Dredging up dirt from the depths of our own Earth,
let it not be said about the Divine Miss H that nothing
in her mirrored my own carnivorous oafishness. Indeed,
I rush to defend myself against accusations of oafishness
with the data that the first half of the year 2002 was made
completely miserable for me by the Divine Miss H doing
a yo-yo routine with my body, my soul, and everything
integrated between my inner-Jesus and *David* cohering
then. Three times, during the first half of 2002, I was,
I felt, consolidated into the kind of ad hoc marriage which
was to be our signature. Three times, during said period,
the Divine Miss H abruptly announced, apropos of
dropping a bomb as casually as possible, that she was now
sleeping with Whoever, which meant I was back on the hook

of being on hold, indefinitely. During these excruciating times,
I found myself not Jesus or *David* but Adam, and madly in love
with a complete twit, whose *tartishness* outshone the very sun in
the sky, and who I might paint, if I could paint, as Isis, or Ingres'
Odalisque, or even, to be ribald, and take the thing more where
I wanted to go, Manet's *Olympia*. So, the boor banging away
at the Divine Miss K has ways and means of defending himself,
against a classic Lady-of-the-Scales, the Cardinal Air, who
is always happy to rationalize away unpleasant realities as she
does her sweep-throughs. As we take whatever place the world
gives us in the vaunted Culture Firmament which overhangs
our enterprise, no one did *The Young and the Restless*
quite like us. A soap opera we were, with stakes very high
to annihilate the entire cultural past of America. Tarts and oafs.

Indication

Chord after chord, in succession, completing formulas
with word after word— we, the two of us, looked out
into the audience— the vibratory frequency was right
to say we achieved lift-off, levitation. Outside Tritone,
cabs, cars, buses ranged this stretch of South Street,
west of Broad, an uncommon one, past the reach of
the teenagers and tourists. And Matt, not one to gush,
simply gestured to indicate he'd enjoyed the proceedings.
An audience, I learned, either gets taken somewhere
or they don't. A keyboard rig with pedals, effects boxes—
a writer with work semi-proven, still young— Apollo,
Dionysus doing their usual uneasy dance. The miniature
one-hitter shaped like a little golden baseball bat— Matt
and I all brimstone to get high. Giant steps, small leaps. Indication.

Sauce

It wasn't just wild stuff— the Aughts delivered lessons,
tangibly manifested, to guide all riders on this particular
storm how to live. Like, as Matt was to help me learn,
you can't get Mary and Abby anywhere near alcohol
without their two asses bouncing off the walls. At first,
it seemed okay. Matt sat at his console, doing mixing
work, as the two ladies conspired a voyage with Bacchus.
Someone had blundered— Abby was aggravated— had
to get home on her bike— Mary ducked under her crab-
shell covering— a ghastly crescendo was at hand. As was
lucky, South Philly is only a few blocks, where we were,
from not-South Philly, where the wholesome game begins
again, so that Abby's shrieks never reached deafening
proportions. But, the Muse insisted, keep them away from the sauce.

Sanctuary

I could bring her coffee-table Raphael books, sketch-pads, colored pencils, chocolate, but what I could not offer her is something secret she was looking for. What that secret was, how to completely bedazzle, mystify, seduce, exalt, depress, and finesse all of human reality without losing an essential sense of balance in day to day life, was the big currency she was missing. Penn Medical Center had a pretty bare-bones mental health wing— uncarpeted linoleum floors, harsh lighting, low ceilings, few windows, so that Mary could not be properly backlit when I visited her there. Yet she got at least some of what she was looking for, because she had her own secret, carried with her since adolescence. Beneath all the bravado, even Mary's hurricane years were tinted oddly by a subterranean sense that she longed to receive sanctuary

somewhere, anywhere. Mary, hurricane or not, intensely wanted to be laid to rest in a quiet place, where she could rest without any daily concerns, and be as taken care of as she could be. So here she was at PMC, and she was insured— she could do this. Yet it meant, for me, that all that tumult, with all that day to day neediness, would have to create an overspill effect which would stop me from moving forward in the world. Thus, this was the beginning of the process of breaking up with her the first time. I tried to give her sanctuary, too, and failed; the momentum of both of our lives made it impossible to do so. So, as she sat, paging lovingly through Raphael, and the other inmates chowed down on *Sleepless in Seattle*, I was left to understand just how much starlight human life can encompass or accommodate, and also how fragile those beams may become, under the rigors of the mundane.

Bloodhounds

It wouldn't have occurred to my brain, still novice in some
respects, that a week in Quebec could deliver Mary and I
the status of ex-pats. The bloodhounds on the train sniffed
at us, I felt, with a hale and hearty sense of jouissance, as if
to say, *here's two live ones*. We were at least circumspect enough
to know, and we did know, as we fished for our passports,
not to try and bring dope. We'd have to get our kicks some
other way in Montreal. This was resented by the bloodhounds,
who saw and knew just how suspect we were, from our quirky
hipster attire to our overly-clever conversations. The bloodhounds,
in fact, grunted when they realized we'd outwitted them. Mary's
big kick, as was not unusual, was her camera, and herself. I was
raw meat— not only did I not realize we were instant ex-pats,
I did not really fathom the potency of pictures, portraits taken in

a foreign country. As the bloodhounds sashayed down the train
line, errant thoughts led them to the conclusion that the blonde,
despite her reasonable passport and lack of dope, knew only too
well how to milk this new place for maximum future-icon wattage.
So, once we settled in on Saint Catherine Street, the camera became
our constant companion, and Mary couldn't have been more hype,
as a visual artist and person, to be backlit Montreal-style. All these
eternities later, the raw meat level of who I was then remains— by
far the most memorable shot happened in our little sub-bed & breakfast,
second-floor garret, in the middle of a morning argument about
whatever. Mary unfolded her extremely rigorous plans for us for
the day, and I objected. I wanted to spend at least one day sitting
in cafes, trying to meet some local artists. To have a good time, in
other words. I snapped the money-shot as she leaned into the window case. Done.

Versailles

Kids we were, moving about in worlds not realized, yet
the big, enfranchised Montreal portrait of Mary demonstrates
just how self-conscious she was about images and imagery.
When I snapped the portrait, in the middle of what became
our Montreal routine, she was as completely in control,
completely in command as she could possibly be. I would
never have guessed— I now imagine the night we arrived
in the room on Saint Catherine Street, Mary's first look around
was where to stand when pictures, portraits could be taken.
This, on a more than semi-conscious level, was her way of
making up to me that the big push towards enfranchisement
would have to be mine. There, in the architectural niche to
the left or the right of the large rectangular (oblong) window-case—
there, vacillating between escape from the pursuit of the male gaze

and defiant (as in her adolescence) confrontation— were she to
make her stand there, adding the contemporary touch of the jade
pendant (looping in the fashionistas), the chiaroscuro of who she
could or could not be in the world would be an unambiguous study
in pristine ambiguities. That calculatedness, on this particular level,
was invisible to me then, as was Mary's tacit acknowledgement to
herself that the long, slow haul would have to be me alone. She
evened the score for herself by doing extra work, which subliminally
made it that our time in Montreal was a working vacation for her.
All that calculatedness also meant that her voice could never stop
ringing in my ears. We would be working together for the rest of
my life, no matter what. The room on Saint Catherine Street not
any more cheerful than anything else, but cheerful for her when
she knew, as I did not, how the portrait would look. Versailles, at least.

Undercurrents

In the usual miscellaneous array of things-that-have-been,
the early Aughts emerge as another time, another configuration.
The idea of the Internet café, passe by the Twenties, was big
then. What Saint Catherine Street had was an Internet café
of sorts, directly across the street from Mary and I's temporary
abode, and also on the second floor. So that, if Mary was tired
out from the day's exertions, and we were, perhaps, waiting to
change clothes and go out to dinner, she would pick up her
sketch book and I would head across the street. The café level
was weak; they didn't have much but candy, candy bars, & soda;
but that wasn't important to me. The big e-mail I remember
receiving in Montreal was from Ted, who I had grown up with
in Cheltenham. Ted, who had a bi-coastal orientation at the time,
but was always interested to hear what had befallen his errant,

unceasingly amusing comrade. Ted heard the entire tale of our
vacation as it had unfolded, and offered a sense of congratulations
for our having arrived, albeit briefly, as ex-pats. As I would read
Ted's missives, I flashed back to being thirteen with Ted at
the Jersey shore. It was all there— the Otherness, the adventure
level of being in a strange place, and I was already precociously
dreaming of blonde goddesses, even as Ted preferred brunettes.
The picture snapped of us, together on a floatation device, returning
from a bout with Atlantic undercurrents— salt on our tongues, we'd
been dunked— was about brotherhood. We took on the ocean together.
Now, we were handling another ocean— marriage. Salt on our tongues,
indeed. Ted thought of me in Montreal with the blonde, remained
laconic about his brunette. I didn't push. But the two grown men
lived with undercurrents we could never have guessed were there, before.

Parc Lafontaine

Being stripped of the rituals and routines which sustained
us, in Montreal Mary and I had no recourse but to face
exactly who we were, individually and reciprocally On one sunny
day, we sat in Parc Lafontaine, and for a good twenty minutes
had nothing to say to each other. We were taxed by being alone
together constantly, not by any sense of fighting. But, as we learned,
there can be an infinite amount of space even between two people
whose lives are entwined, and so it was with us. That, until we
realized, with some dismay, that the Parc Lafontaine bathroom
situation was haphazard. Parc Lafontaine, which looked not unlike
an extended, forested version of Logan Circle in Philly, was a place
meant to be finessed by serious Montreal people who knew the ins
and outs of the place. We were foreigners. Mary grew agitated. She
needed to use the bathroom, having had, if I remember correctly,

too much tea with our breakfast. The wall-like silence was broken
by the panic scenario, a not uncommon one, of the foreigners looking
to take care of their physical mechanisms the right way. We rambled,
scrambled, and lunged into a random lunch/dinner place which
had not yet opened. They were gracious enough to let Mary use
their facility. Oddly enough, the incident brought us together again,
left us in a better mode. But the whole expanse of time in Montreal,
wherein we were locked into each other, I experienced as a Dantean
Purgatorio. It needed to be documented, by ourselves, for ourselves,
that we could hack the rigors of foreign travel, and the disjuncture it
entails. Everything raw and jagged about our relationship would
have to come to the surface— wall-like silences, awkward spaces.
Parc Lafontaine became a tragi-comic reminder of travails begetting
triumphs, adversity become strength. Logan Circle with forests.

Repertoire

In the repertoire or array of arts and tricks developed
by Mary in her childhood and adolescence, only an
onlooker with eagle eyes could distinguish what emerged
as, possibly, the most important one. Mary got off, as they
say, on swings back and forth on paradoxes and dichotomies.
My mind teetered through this terrain about her insides as I
chanted out, through gritted teeth, the abstruse formulas of
the *Bringing Down the Light* ritual I had thoughtfully included
in our luggage. Mary rocked back and forth on our adequate,
if not luxuriant, bed, here in this garret room on Saint Catherine
Street. She was distraught; naked but for her panties; we'd just
seen sights in the neighborhood she found harrowing, a barroom
brawl, the spilling of a pool of actual blood; we were alone in a
foreign country. It jumped up in my blood uncomfortably that Mary

was a sucker for the wasted elegance of a nice, cozy hospitalization.
In a foreign country no less, far from the usual support systems. So, I chanted,
accompanied it with the requisite hand and arm movements, as dictated
by the file I'd downloaded once I'd received the key from the Thelemic
Order of the Golden Dawn. How Mary learned, in an avatar-like way,
to tune in on raw energy frequences, rather than fixating on rituals
that had to focus on Jesus and the Bible, I don't know. It was the sense,
as a girl, that the world inside her, starting with colors and forms, was
just too huge to be encompassed by any one belief or value system.
It was an intense desire for the polyglot fluency of a mind that could
find dichotomies to ride— flesh/spirit, abstinence/consummation—
anywhere. As *Bringing Down the Light* concluded, I noted that Mary
was healed. The raw energy frequency of the script saw us through—
I'd pulled up heads that Mary's repertoire (heathen/believer) held fast.

Flame-Heads

I would learn later in my life, with a sense of tickled
amusement, the term recon folks dish out for blonde
women: *flame-heads*. The lazy, crazy, hazy flame-heads
of the world want everything to be unique, singular,
special. Corresponding with Ted, I flashed back on
another scene from our adolescence, as I went the rigorous
daily rounds with Mary. It was a night in Glenside— we
were doing an extended phone-chat, as we sometimes
did, with a few girls our age, who happened to be stationed
at Oak Summit Apartments, a few blocks away. One was
a blonde, and a queen among blondes, for thirteen-year-olds—
already physically developed, precociously sharp about being
a woman. The other, brunette, was less goddess-ish, but also
imperious about demanding reality from people who talked

to her— a real no-bullshit controller of who was telling the truth
about what, who was being real. The deal was simple for Ted
and I, although the time was a little late, maybe 10:30 pm. We
would crash the Oak Summit apartment— I would take the blonde,
he the brunette. We got, as was not unusual, parent-blocked.
But it was funny to me then, as Mary and I, say, climbed
Mount Royal, or strolled Saint Denis Street, so that Mary could
see a special exhibit there, or toured Christ Church Cathedral,
where Mary disappeared for ten extremely frightening minutes
and was then found again, or sat around on the McGill campus,
that I was specially with the special blonde, just as I wanted,
but that it was not as completely a solution to my health and welfare
as I thought it would be. Ted's penchant for hard-headed practicality
was interesting, too. I would later say: love of *flame-heads* is love of fire.

Jagged

Being cut off from the drugs she used to stabilize and balance her emotions, Mary was a prey to moodiness in Montreal. So much of what we were doing was about seeds planted for our future as artists— all long-range plans Mary had made— that Mary blew off caring about the short-term goal of having any fun or kicking back and seriously relaxing. Credit where credit's due— Mary learned, very thoroughly, her way around Montreal before we got there. Navigating the Montreal subway system was thus easy with her around. Nor was there any dawdling about where to go next— Mary was a cyclone of involvement on that level, and it was all taken from my hands. It's just that, in my youth, I did not understand, and Mary did not bother to explain, the calculatedness of what her camera did, where we went, what we saw in what order and why. And pot not being there to take

the edge off, for both of us, meant that we could hit a jagged interval at any time. What Mary had available as a combo— pills, Klonnies, and no pot— made a cocktail that could run around loose for a whole day, but then crash abjectly into a trance-level stupor not to be untangled. Mary, without pot, was also easily spooked, not just by barroom brawls on Saint Catherine Street but by anything that seemed like someone was sending her bad vibes. The night Mary abruptly gestured for us to leave a random English-language bookstore on the Plateau, I thought she was merely bored, but when I looked closer at her, I understood that she felt someone had made an inappropriate, ominous pass while I had my back turned. Mary without pot could be paranoid. The moments we spent close to the edge just had to be endured, as the seeds that needed to be planted were.

Devil's World

The realer real realities can be pretty frumpy, right?
What God, or tapping into God-force energies, is—
a long, slow haul, in which you have to do everything
for yourself. You want quick action, you go to the Devil.
Quick action will be delivered, but the repercussions will
be negative, and everything you've accomplished will
be erased. Rocks and hard places. Except to say, that when
the days in Montreal ended with us ensconced, it seems to me
that Mary had on her mind, other than pictures, portraits taken
and places visited, the fretful sense, even then, that she should
be with someone else. Someone with more money, more worldly
power. She would choose to note, as she lay there, half-asleep,
that the fresh-faced *David* stud guy, with *David* capacities, who
was (she would have to admit) intelligent, was still a poor

substitute for the right kind of banker or trust-funder, who could
buy her clear passage to the right kind of renown. The depth
of my devotion to her was not in question. The question was
about what it means to live in the Devil's world, in which all
that long, slow haul, God-force energy, is easy to doubt, because
we would all like something more demonstrative, more *rapidamente*.
The noises from Saint Catherine Street, from where we were on
the second floor, weren't that obtrusive, but there were some.
No air conditioning meant I used a wet sponge to help me cool
off. Mary did similarly. If I had more money, of course, she
wouldn't have had to, because we would be staying somewhere
more grandiose. In the Devil's World, the long, slow, God-force
informed haul, which was to be our destiny, is full of doubts.
Mary wanted quick action, not just sex, part of the time too. Good night.

Proven

You might not want to call us scoundrels, for the time we
spent basking in the glow of the foreign. Cheating Montreal
meant being there in the midst of their brief, two-month
summer. Our second-floor garret room, not up to bed
& breakfast level but also private, secluded from any kind
of staff or maintenance person, under the aegis of God
knows what or who, directly overlooked Saint Catherine Street.
No air conditioning; the mornings were sticky. Mary had
a number of brisk mornings in a row, long agendas of where
to go, what to do all day already planned. But on one sultry
morning, she tried to access the fuse-box of purposeful,
assertive day-momentum, and failed. What happened
instead was nothing unusual— the re-consummation of our
marriage, into the exotic earth around and beneath us—

but it changed our dynamic permanently. It always meant
that our thoughts of who we had been and what we had done
together could go skyward at any moment, even once we
were no longer together. There was nothing about who we
had been that could be erased. The consummation ceremony—
slow, languorous, in bright morning sunshine striking
the queen-size bed occupying the center of a space uncarpeted,
wood-slat floors, walk-in shower, no bath (and certainly no
Continental breakfast waiting for us)— did its milestone number.
If it was done Bohemian-style, it was a raw, as usual, version
of Bohemia we channeled. At the end of the day, nothing to
romanticize, just the sense that Mary's camera caught her at
an absolute zenith of body/soul unity, just as she wished.
Our time in bed was a deep breath we took together. And proven.

Absorbing the Mountain

And did she know, Miss H, how dirty it would have
to be, for us to make it in the world? She must've.
Beneath the veil of enfranchised blondeness, a quite
precocious mind. Certainly, she noticed my own moment
of most achieved satisfaction, other than our usual antics—
the climbing of Mount Royal. It was though the nature
forces, who perceived us on our particular hike, rewarded
me, once Miss H's mystical spell had been cast, for years
in which grit and grime would have to stick to every
attempt at success in the literary world, artistic world,
avant-garde, or what have you. I stood on top of Mount Royal
with an epiphany going that was handed to me from
somewhere else. I would be the one to dive into the mud,
appease the squealers and oinkers, amuse the dogs. That's

why Mary submitted to me. For a blistering moment, atop
Mount Royal, it all made sense— what it would mean to be
a man who could provide for my loved ones. Even if being
artists angled us against conventional assignations. Another
hot, sunny day, Mary quiet, after a series of cell phone calls
back to Philadelphia. Me in thrift-store trousers I'd picked
up on South Street, slightly beleaguered here by other
tourists' more conventional attire. Not caring much, a man
living through a moment of having proven again what Mary
and I had proved together— the world could be solid, life
could be solid, and solidity could be imposed on what might
remain gelatinous if not imposed on. Fudging things, playing
dirty, was permissible if the foundational ethos behind it was
solid. This, I learned later. Now, minutes in the sun, absorbing the mountain.

Loner

Chopping into the innards of a spectacular spring day,
I cannot help but wonder at how long its taken me to
get to simple home truths about Mary and I. To see,
really and truly, where the walls were and why they were
there. It would never have occurred to me in Montreal,
for instance, to understand that, if Mary did not share
my penchant for hanging out in cafés, meeting the local
Bohemians, it's because her primordial stance before
the world was not a social one. Behind all the seductive
razmatazz, she was a loner. I'm included, then, in her package
deal, because she's spotted that I have talent. Once
that's established, I become an extension of the idea
that Mary will surround herself with tokens and totems
to reinforce her eventually triumphant emergence in the world.

The drug girls, like Saskia and Maya, came and went. Abby
was allowed to stay because, like me, she became another
talented extension of Mary herself. All the levels of personal
interaction between Mary and I wavered between real intimacy
and the impersonality of me being *David*, the ideal male nude,
who could also sub as a permanent curator for her too, and, most
importantly, a backer for her with more vital energy than she
had. By Montreal, Mary was slightly lost from all the powder
that had gone up her nose. It imperceptibly started to be the case
that she dropped plans to take the East Coast by storm, continued
with me in the hopes, well-founded, that I would never drop her.
She was right: I would not. When we had a photo-strip done at
a photo booth in a random Montreal train station, she was the one
who knew I would make it public. That jade pendant again. Us.

Our Dance

Taking it again to a place which might seem gratuitous,
Mary and I were two elaborate brains in two elaborate
bodies. I can only conjecture, about the texture of Mary's
consciousness, regarding what sexual power I might or
might not have had over her. The anti-panegyric, as it were,
to *David*, Biblical Adam, and the man himself, which
centered on my oafishness, needs to be balanced by Mary's
own implied confession of fragility on several relevant levels.
Mary took wifely time, at least some of the time, to do crafts
work around our marriage. Such as, putting together a hand-
crafted picture book about our adventure in Montreal. As I saw
her doing it, I understood that not every level of Mary's brain
was glued to an unconventional frequency. What stunned me
is that when the book was completed, it was a fait accompli

to hand the book to me for safe keeping. Beneath her painterly
machismo, the photos in the book which could be used to
our advantage had to be bequeathed to me, because Mary
knew, in a world-weary way, that her shakiness rendered her
ineligible to keep the thing. Everything about us to he
consolidated would have to be consolidated by me. Does
consolidation, aesthetic or otherwise, have to be a man's work?
So, over decades, for the oaf with Michelangelo's stud as
a doppelganger, there is also the wry sense that Mary was willing
to admit, out of the side of her cannabis-caressed mouth, that I
was capable of a level of responsibility and responsiveness to
necessity that she was not. All her major photographs, in fact,
were bequeathed to me. She was intelligent enough, canny enough,
to know that if she put me at the center of them, I'd follow them through. Our dance.

The Ritz

Like anyone else bent towards the substantial, Mary
had to live in the world as it was. She had to make her
picks, out of the daily culture that was just around,
what to patronize— what to watch, what to listen to.
Politics were perfunctory for her. For us, too, because
I always felt politics dwells too much on present-mindedness.
The movies Miss H chose to watch, and for us to watch
together, were mostly European art-house. That's why nights
at The Ritz, Philly's choice art-house theater in those days,
were always special. As I could never not be amused with,
European art-house for Miss H often devolved into what
I called Euro-Smarm. These were the kind of European
dramatic presentations with a patina of artiness about them,
but beneath, if you looked closely at plot, characterization,

it was just *The Young and the Restless* again. Specifically,
The Ritz at the Bourse, where I took Mary to see *Amelie*
on what amounted to our first date, and chundered through
two hours of totalized tweeness that took me on a heart-
of-darkness journey about what my future held, was attractive
to Mary on other levels. The theaters were underground, so to
speak, so that you would need to take a long escalator down to
reach them. Other amenities, red plush carpeting, a concession
stand tastefully placed in the center of a composition with theater
doors to the right of it, the sense that one could see, even from
the bottom of the escalators, up onto Fourth Street, through
a series of large, artful glass panes, made Mary feel comfortable
patronizing The Ritz. She did so as an individual, as was important, not
declasse. Against the world, Mary at her best knew how to make herself comfortable.

Theater of the Living Arts

Sour-puss it is, how culture goes up and down, taking
with it, sometimes, real things that people really like,
replacing them with the half-real or worse. How Ted
and I, for instance, paraded through the sections of
West Coast Video in Glenside— the epoch of video
stores— looking for the movie to rent for the night—
pricelessly about two kids, being as culturally for real
as we could be. Ted did not share my taste for the macabre,
so no *I Spit On Your Grave* or *Basket Case*. Video stores,
the good ones, were wholesomely about being for real.
The mid-Twenties finds it all a memory, except to say that
the gliding sashay through sections of Miss H at the TLA
(Theater of the Living Arts) video store on Spruce Street,
not far from Broad, in Center City Philly, easily outdid

Grace Kelly being Grace Kelly— the Main Line being adjacent,
as it still is, to Media. If I tried a classy macabre move,
like *Suspiria*, Mary would still turn up her nose. Would it
have to be more Euro-Smarm? Probably. But catch Mary
browsing with me at TLA, and you have a couple united in
perfect happiness, absolute harmony. The night was about
to be disposed of the right way. A few tokes on the right
spliff, and in my pad the blue IKEA couch turned around
to face a mid-sized, adequate computer monitor, and we
were ready to roll. The whole video store ritual lost, to an
entire culture, is a cruel one. Nothing's a complete experience
anymore. Nights can be jagged. By the time Mary had a solid
laptop, we moved up together, to Netflix. Mary got macabre,
with *Six Feet Under*. She had too much class to spit on graves.

Star Child

So, there we sat in Kim's car, for the hour's
ride back from New Hope to Center City; drowsy,
all three of us, on a bunch of laced weed, thinking
whatever we were thinking. Kim kept putting
the pedal to the metal at times slightly off. We all
could've been as good as dead, if we didn't have it,
but we did. What we had was a shared pact, into
the air, the spheres, the universe, that whatever befell
us at that time, that place, we would have to survive,
because we just would. And we did. Which didn't
change the state of affairs, stagnant for both of us
with Kim, not brimful of anything, that whatever
soporific fantasies I might've had, our taking her out
to canoe on the Delaware did not result in any

consummation, and with her forgetting her purse on
one of the islands, where we got even more trashed.
We forgot about this, the ride home, Kim's reflexes, how
the rest of our lives depended on something not proven,
trustworthy. The two buddies had brains circling
similarly: *nothing to worry about, go with it, understand
your invincibility, it's there if you believe, it just is*. Where
shields like that come from, I don't know, but I will
say— exclusivity is the rule. You only depend on it
if you know it's there. Off the two of them went, into
the late afternoon sun, after dropping me off in Logan
Square. Somewhere, a frequency in the sky consolidated
itself. Gaetan didn't look like a star-child then, but he was.
His magnanimity, more than a lion's, granted him nine lives.

Pot Hikes

To walk around Center City Philadelphia on a sunny
spring or summer day, stoned on a lot of grass, was
a tradition inaugurated by Gaetan and I at the turn of
the century. The pot hikes, as you might call them, were
a chance for us to create cultural discourses, air grievances,
ruminate about our respective adolescences, compare
notes on different levels about the Center City scene,
and boast, also, of conquests, past, present, and future.
Macho stuff. But for two macho guys, thrown in headlong
into a heady mix of infinite socio-sexual possibilities,
even the continued, droll-ified war-chant *bros before hos*
couldn't quell the cognitive dissonance which sometimes had
to be there. Competition and competitiveness had to take
and humanize a scenario that, when we walked around

Rittenhouse Square, for example, was mixed up with celestial
seasonings as well. The spring day I trundled Mary and Abby
to Gaetan's studio in South Philly, the weather was idyllic. From
inside the sparsely window'd second-floor studio-space, that
didn't matter much. The agenda that mattered for me that day—
I was with Mary, established, and I wanted to see if Gaetan and Abby
would go for each other. Occasionally, like any other two *bandito*
buddies, Gaetan and I would misfire. Gaetan, it turns out, when
finally almost alone with the lanky, willowy blonde, lost his shit slightly.
Abby clammed up. Within an hour, all four of us were very stoned.
Gaetan and Mary danced around each other (Gaetan had music
blaring from the studio speakers) provocatively. They were both
drooling. I was used to seeing Gaetan do *putz-out* with girls, but
this was *my* girl. I frog-marched the bewildered ladies out. No hard feelings.

Stoli

There was a rightness to it, a dozen of us
sitting around in a circle, mostly naked, to celebrate
Gaetan's birthday. The Stoli bottle circulated, taking
us to a place transmuted into the right kind of
drunkenness, even as a few yards away, through
thick insulated walls, South Philly churned in its
filthy bowels as usual. Festering, ready to toss the game for
the rest of Philly, also as usual, it leered that any interested
party could imbibe the right way here, get a new game
on. As in, see if we could handle the rawness, realness,
righteousness of being naked on what was shag
carpeting. This, a room otherwise unfurnished, littered
with instruments, amplifiers, speakers, not many amenities
to mollycoddle the posh. The bodies of all and sundry

had ways and means of being posh anyway, Anastasia
clipped from a Victoria's Secret catalogue, heart-stopping
as a Jersey born and bred vixen could be, calculating
as Springsteen's Candy. By the time the bottle reached me,
I had a lot to prove. I was compelled to say to this crowd,
just by close conformity, *I belong with you*. Not that anyone
noticed me in particular, or were reserved if they did.
In any case, I quaffed seven or eight shots of Stoli at once.
After a fifteen minute wave of utter ecstasy, which was able to unfold itself
because I did it, I'd been approved, I knew I was in
here the right way, I knew (also) I'd be sick if I stayed. So I
quietly put on my clothes, staggered out into the autumnal
mud of 13th Street, just north of Ellsworth, and my own circle closed.
The length of Center City, back to Logan Square, smudged gold.

Unhinged

Because you could cut paper with Anastasia's cheek-bones,
and her wide hips wing-tipped no flab at all, and not to say
her carriage manifested any movements but a feline strut,
a surfeit of attention is what she was used to. She paced
the polished wooden Highwire floors, flooded
herself in red wine, huffed nitrous, and erected the requisite
inaccessible, impervious front to those foolhardy enough
to believe they could approach her. I, for instance,
knew the ropes, and had too much to do anyway. Except,
at some point in one fateful night's festivities, all the junk
in Anastasia's brain, everything frozen, lazy-loafing,
shy of approach, froze— nights spent following other people
around, waiting to be signaled, signals sent back registering
ranking, surfeits of attention delivering not love but lust—

caught up with her at last, and she exploded. Gaetan
was exasperated to find her sitting in one of the windows
of the gallery's west-facing façade, threatening to jump.
Gaetan was a cool customer, but spur him with something
unhinged, he would warp into warrior mode, brusquely
brush off those inexpert, and set to work. We all watched
as Gaetan leveled with Anastasia, whose drunkenness
was not helping her, leading her to understand that
the situation was hardly hopeless. She had a real life,
friends, purpose, and everyone here cared about her.
The party, as an entirety, you would think ceased, yet
it did not. Not all the revelers realized the drama unfolding.
Even those who did drunkenly chose to trust Gaetan. I
did, too, was right to— she tumbled back into a genuine surfeit.

Luminescence

Mike and I watched curiously from the entranceway—
The Bats had judiciously placed Abby, with electric
keyboard and microphone, on the polish-floored centerstage.
The luminescence of the heir apparent to the French Neo-
Classicists (no one since David could do portal-ways with
her assurance) thusly declared its dominion over all.
Even as the homeliness of souped-up punk music, thrown
together by Abby and Liz, made an odd juxtaposition
with Abby's compositional detailing, worthy of Ingres himself,
and from a center of consciousness just as immersed in girls.
Abby's way and manner of suturing together the sublime
and the ridiculous in her life was unique, gutsy. The Highwire
rocked on its foundations that night, as Mike and I watched,
sharing a spliff. Liz had already decided: Abby was riding

towards me. This was a powerful scene. Abby enjoyed the discipline
of placing herself under Liz. Thus, getting official sanction to
shack up with the one straight guy who meant the most to
her was a special treat. Ultimately, the funniest, horniest
cosmic joke is that this was the moment Abby came to be in full
command of her painterly powers. The arcane sense of
super-advanced spatiality in her brain liked the crowds
and foot-lights just fine. They made her feel loved. For
this brief moment, she could just about handle the demands
of a history-making muse. It all coalesced into a sense
that the ups and downs of days not untouched by
the demands of regional celebrity (including media demands)
pushed Abby into a space where she was compelled to be
productive in other ways. One version of the seeding of the century.

Palette

There, Laird was— suburban provider, Christian
Rightest— but no goomba. The Harjus chose not
to do outside-inside as a demarcative imperative. They
were around. Abby, feasibly, could've been in with them.
It was a quirk of the time that she was not. Perhaps they
would reject her dyke streak, dyke habits, dyke friends.
Hard to tell. But, worth knowing— there was no Abby
to Media. Being lateral, the data is there to work with—
Abby, of the two, could cut a rug properly. Mary, trying
to dance, was a clumsy giraffe. Twice lateral, understand
that Mary was very floridly emotional about other people.
She was personal. Abby was a spark-plug, but could also
be a clod, where other people were concerned. When Abby
danced with boys (and girls), she came to vivid life. Pre-ambling

through the past, to get to the night, upstairs at the Khyber,
dead of winter, when the Free School were stationed there for drinks,
as were The Bats. I'm, in that context, the only Free School
guy other than Gaetan who could man the dance floor, and of
course Gaetan could wipe the floor with me there. As could
Abby, and was doing precisely that, but then commenced to
flirt with me. Aggressively. Letting through deeply felt emotions,
for once, which had been boiling beneath the surface for
years. Being passionate, like Mary. We spent maybe fifteen
minutes grinding. Staying in that moment, no denying a shared
sense of resentment with Mary, who had jumped ship, joined
Laurie in pursuit of money. Let it be known, also, that her new
material tastes were sophisticated ones, her new husband
a sophisticated palette to feed. Now Abby and I could feed on each other.

Superimposition

When Mary painted the two faces, mine and Abby's,
superimposed, against the sickliest, dullest earth-tone
background color-grid imaginable (puke green, also, putting
in a queasy appearance), it was a new, metaphysical
racket for her as a painter. Abby and I had done it,
were consummated. Mary's response was to punish us,
demonstrate the monstrosity of our perversion. She
was, as we could only have half-known, extremely hurt.
Her delicate sense of balance registered that she had trusted
us, expected we would maintain reasonable boundaries.
With our unfreeze, a clown-mask face for us. In East Falls,
Mary was trapped into a compromised position. Her family
had generated an unacceptable position for her, placed
in a pathetic tryst with a cold curmudgeon. Purgatory.

Glass-Bottomed Boat

What was *declasse* in the world pissed Mary off
to no end. What was *frumpy*, almost as much.
Drunken or stoned Mary, just-got-laid Mary,
in a snit Mary, and even violently mood-swung
Mary were all still trooper-level determined to
maintain and consolidate style-levels. So, for Mary
to manifest at the Highwire— and she only made
one major appearance there— sunken into the depths
of pony-tailed, sweat-shirted, no jade pendant-ed
frumpiness, something would have to have been
drastically off. Simple: it was Laurie, grinning impishly
next to her, looking razor-sharp; a dream, in fact, of
elegant semi-business (light business) attire. Laurie was
also, then, often dressed tie-dyed, like a crunchy granola

hippie— was, herself, a crunchy granola hippie— but also
about business, and a pronounced, vested, *holistic* interest
in her father's portfolio. That night, Laurie settled herself
and sat around different places in the Highwire, like she
was riding (as I had) a glass-bottomed boat in Nassau. She
found ways of admiring the purple-striped fish (like Mary
and I), the sky-blue fish, the ratty-tailed fishes, especially
the lugubriously huge ones, but they were all beneath her,
and securely so. In the war the two sisters were fighting,
Laurie was momentarily winning, and saw expansive
years coming, as a bridge to an easy victory. With
me forgotten, Mary would occupy space in the world
as Crazy Aunt Mary, semi-bag lady, living on other's charity,
probably hers. And that would be fine. Mary disagreed.

Side-Armed

She said, undressing, to love is to be
an orphan hiding from a hurricane in
a church made of glass. Impractical, I
said, and I don't like metaphors in bed
anymore, in my old age, any more than I
like spiders. Then, as we made love, she
said, you're an orphan, hiding from a hurricane.
Oh, I said, are you a church made of glass?
Well, she said, I'm a little cracked, aren't I?
Outside, cars slithered by, oblivious, exhaust
fumes tingeing humid summer air. You're
cracked alright, and so is your sister, I see.
I baited her to collapse onto my chest,
throwing stones side-armed, at this glass church

Ruth would have to be, to be here. She
herself took time to investigate adultery, as
other writers had— out of boredom, maybe,
or out of her own side-armed need to express
something more than the suburbs. That's where,
unfortunately, they had her. She would not
want her husband shown— I will not show him.
I will only say that what people who want to
write work in on the side may be of interest or
not, but manifests instincts we shared together,
then and now. A month later: the City Hall court
yard blazed with summer heat. We were over, that
was it. She wanted, she said, some order and discipline
in her life. Before us lies eternity, I said. Or eternal lies.

Silencer

Sultry September: they were snorting coke in a room
upstairs at this party and, it was rumored, playing
Russian Roulette. I had seen the pistol, silencer
and all. Evening shadows cast an eerie glow of nowhere—
someone pushed past me, frankly, to join the affair.
I now received these invitations because I had done
the incumbent-upon-me thing— I was not lingering,
looking at the poetry beau monde from the outside
(perhaps sneering derisively), I was *in the ring*. Calloused
fingers from writing half-meant reviews, credit card taxed
from busing and planning around the East Coast and
elsewhere, the door that was slightly ajar I had kicked
way the hell open. I was, thus, at least one part hack.
But the silencer placed on me meant that no one attacked.

The Dare: Eighteen Months

March sun gathers then loses momentum, sets
over Pine Street. The DJ ducks north on 10th,
into a normal-looking row-home: more free
dope in an untenanted wasteland— bathroom
cabinets full of it. It's worth noting to him, six
months in, that the Sword of Damocles doesn't
hesitate to make its presence felt, even with tunes
and other pleasant buzzes in the air; even with girls,
crowds, press, compliments, the way they dance
for his sets. Yet, he took the dare. This is the life
he wants. The hangman's noose at the end can't
matter. The noose is as real as this is: not for him.
He's being trailed: what he takes is being counted.
He knows. Another chilly knife-edge night. Why not?

Nights I Staggered Drunkenly

I.
Nights I staggered drunkenly, down the winding,
white-walled corridor which led to two major Highwire
entrances (the ware-house space and the gallery itself);
how it was that our version of freedom (Free School),
stitched to good old-fashioned luck, had been allowed
to recreate cultural Philadelphia from its insides out, I
could never figure out. The set-up, me calling the shots,
added a patina of raw power to my persona which had
never been there before. I looked loose, worldly. I was,
unwittingly, being scoped out by eyes raised on the rigors
of politics, blended with also-raw eroticism, raw determination.
In the sense of a quintessence of material action, the world.
With that quintessential world, the possibility of quick,
painful obsolescence— alongside the drunken rapture.

II.
Two bottles of half-finished whiskey gaped on
the island space, mid-gallery; green odors emanated from
corners. The crowd, teens and twenties, ribald,
projected an O-mind, as though a Pandora's Box
had opened, allowing them to float in a stark bardo
where salvation was granted to those gutsy enough
to ride the rollicking waves. We had turned the right
keys to let these people free, taught them the rigors
of real freedom. My satori, then, was about responsibility.
Knowledge had to be passed what we'd accomplished
here, in Philadelphia. Only I could give form to all
the shapeless exuberance. Prizes yet to be granted
to me strutted around, bathing in the warmth of our masses.
Another satori, more responsibilities. Beleaguered in lasting.

Ocean Queen

It was another drunken night at McGlinchey's, eyes
and ears to the ground as usual, broken then only by
your arrival. It must've been Nick who met you first,
I don't remember, but I saw you were fixated on
him. Hannah: you introduced yourself as a California bred
novelist, politico. My appraisal was that your looks
teetered ambiguously into divisiveness for those you might interest—
heavy brows, wavy hair, tall, a bit tomboyish, also. But
you established yourself as articulate, too: a charmer. I
registered the sense that if I ever got you, it would
be something gratuitous, a surprise, because you seemed
to be a closed fortress, and choosing Nick seemed, also,
to betray a masochistic streak. That night, his front
swelled visibly with your arrival— I stepped back.

You were, must've been, I later realized, underwater
somehow, surveying currents, examining the wildlife,
surreptitiously and invisibly carving a watery path to me.
I had only what the male of the species always has—
the equipment to complete your circuitry, potent or
impotent in any time or context, waiting latent to
take our moment, make it crescendo through the reef,
weed, rock, as though destined, written into ocean's
records an eternity ago, when all life dwelt in the ocean,
all encounters occurred in resplendent semi-darkness.
And all this still sitting with the gang at "The Glinch,"
holding your own with a bunch of macho punks, who
were taking something in Philadelphia by force, me
selected silently, the tomboy a crowned Ocean Queen—

Undulant

for Hannah Miller

I'd made plans to meet you in Bar Noir
on 18th; you were there; we drank. What
happened after that, in the Logan Square
flat, is that in defrocking you knocked over
an antique lamp bequeathed to me by my
aunt in Mahopac. Serendipity, I thought,
stunned then into silence by your bedroom
élan. Outside, a sultry night simmered; this
night of all nights, scattered green glass littered
my bedroom floor, and I finally got taken, past
liquor, to what eternity was only in your mouth—
as though you'd jumped from a forest scene
(ferns, redwoods), a world of pagan magic,
into a scene still undulant with possibilities—

Denouement

Was it even you anymore? You took the podium,
began your screed: here's what Philadelphia *could* be.
The night proceeded from act to act— our enemies
were taken aback— I now boasted big-boy curating
entanglements. I knew *that* place— the wrong kind
of underwater, piranhas hungrily looking for what might
be real to rip to shreds, offal everywhere—
was not for me, just as (to be stern) you were not for me either.
All your politico postures were about barnstorming fortresses
set against you, ravishing them through pure *force*
majeure. You were pure angel/demon, Hannah. I'd
have to retreat to the back of your consciousness—
an old conquest, not especially vaunted, burrowing down
into binds to find reality, missing unreality's deliciousness—

Iguana

Nitrous tanks re-closeted, our Highwire era sputtered shut.
Gaetan grooved into a walk-up row-home in the Teens,
south of South Street, with, as usual, an extended ensemble of
crazy characters and, this time, a large, languid iguana.
I had a sense of exultation, watching him linger on his
branch, in a wire-mesh encasement area, as we toked up,
as usual. I felt he understood who I was, who we were,
with an uncanny, ancient means of reptilian knowing,
not devoid of warmth, or whimsy. When Gaetan brought
him out to roam as he wished, I could see the rapport they
had was real. In a world in which you could be with, or
without, he (whose name I admittedly don't recall) was with us.
I have, now, my branch, wire-mesh encasement area, and the rest.
He's remained alive in me. Not speaking for Gaetan, at least.

Russian Roulette

The vagaries of semi-transgression— I at least gave
myself credit for waiting until the semester ended.
Add this, I thought, to my scorecard of offenses
generated in the licentious Aughts. Who Julia was,
sprung from Glenside into Pine Street not unlike
myself, had an inner ache to write that itched
painfully, so that she took solace from a literary
lover who had been her teacher. Raven-haired
sitter-on-my-shoulder, she carried back to Glenside
even then who I was, had become. Narratives
from her own life made the ache burn into
full-out licentiousness, so that she threw what
she was at me in a cloud of turbulent cuteness,
drunken— drunkenly staged— but permanent.

She should've been a redhead, I thought,
as she drew the blinds, locked the red wine
in the cabinet, drained her glass, and bounced
into bed— not precisely the Don Juana of
her postures, more like a vision of Pre-Raphaelite
schizophrenia, as one reads in Victorian novels.
Writing this, after twenty years, it seems dulcet,
peaceful, rather than a plunge into a life or death
game of Russian Roulette, which is what it was
for us. The book I'd just published sat on the
living room sofa, as if there could be any other
reason for all this, the wine, the bullets; what I
put into her was another kind of book. The full
dome effect, for her, caused a thousand suicides.

Flaming Red Hair

The Last Drop lost its *joie de vivre* in 2009—
Dani enforced this, acting out a script
(tease, taunt, topple) written for her by
South Philly goons. Why I'm now bemused
by the gaucherie of Dani's gestures— cheap,
black, low-cut dresses worn to reveal ample cleavage,
flaming red hair styled always in plummeting
cascades— is that in '18, no one's titillated
by anything, let alone Dani— negligee stores derelict.
The truth of the imbroglio is an embarrassed
grin, about a grueling summer day encumbered
by our teased out, taunted out encounter. I
must say I am tempted to lie. The bathroom
door shut on us. The Drop was hollowed out.

In the end, I pined for Dani on those nights
the grim reality of the recession still hadn't sunk in—
as though the revelation, again, of her breasts could
deliver me from shadows which impinged, but (it
seemed) possibly only temporarily. Once, in her
Pine Street apartment, she bothered to walk around
before me in a bath towel— the teasing, taunting then
brought, it would seem, to apotheosis. Permission
granted, then denied, pushed past, *joie de vivre* visited
upon the bloody-minded redhead, forever. Dani
knowingly inverted Mary and Abby— lineaments
of gratified desire replaced by sharpened knives.
In the ascendency (the Philly party being over), Dani
turned graciousness disgusting— symbolic leg extended, foot resting on sink.
.

Incarnadine

First Friday, Olde City, autumn: I watched Abby
seduce a curator in the Artists House Gallery, clawed
my way past buskers and vendors, up again to Logan
Square. Then, up 21st Street, over to the Franklin Institute,
out onto the Parkway, where a slight tilt will show
you the Art Museum; back over and around, and wandered
into my flat. The soft October warmth told me what
I wanted to hear, for a hot minute: eternity, ecstasy,
elevation, riding the waves on an ocean of buildings—
Center City's own, wholesome ocean. A great recession
was approaching, destined to pinch some of us to death,
but in the end, it didn't matter— Abby's striped, clinging
gown that night, wavering between maroon and plain red,
marked my brain as permanently made incarnadine, for her and us—

Portal-ways

Was it through you, Abby, I managed to do
Queer Studies 101? Here's what I saw: you
aligned yourself with bad girls, to make yourself
look formidable, lived a life of intermittent
lassitude & discipline, tawny head bent down
to study coded missives you dared not decipher,
and then the bittersweet aftermath into postures
you earned for yourself. Girls in a row, a pretense
for an artist of your magnitude. Was that all
you had inside you? I wonder, but it's none of
my business, as the Neo-Classical portal-way
built into your brain hovers around the Earth
for a few centuries, and the paintings themselves
form a row, disciplined, formidable, coded, bittersweet—

Glass Doors

It isn't difficult for me to imagine why it might
be that, painting and drawing done for the night, Abby
would stand outside Mary's glass-paneled,
completely curtained double doors, and listen to
us making love. All this time later, I see it as
a manifestation-in-action of *The Lost Twins*,
from Abby's own vaunted masterpiece, rising
to the surface of Abby's brain, and asserting their
presence. The male-leaning twin laughs at all
the pushing and grunting, the sleazy cheesiness
of what I have between my legs (she has one too),
as though I thought it made me big in the world
(it did not) to bang away at Mary as if the world
depended on it. The profound dumbness of sex

and sexual intercourse mixed with the pride of her
own phallic presence in the world, doing an even
more manly routine of being split, being two
people at once. She could make both of them thrust
through the surface of human life, into art
taken from two places, willed into brilliant
singularity, in a way the grunting moron could
never understand. The male-leaning twin wins.
The real girl twin remains a coy maiden, building
up the guts to let herself into bed with me,
jealous of Mary's easy submissiveness, as though
to the manner born, of letting the man be the man,
however dumb, and riding the waves towards twin
peaks, rather than Lost Twins, behind glass doors.

Dresser

It wasn't real, was it, or maybe it was, us,
there, together in bed, as though you were
Mary, as though we were married, as though
you could be her, that person, generating
domestic sweets for your old man. He, gnarled
after a long day of fighting in the world, ready
once again to prove potency against oppressors
who would have us cold, limp, silent, faded
in that beige-walled bedroom. Us, lifted above
the rest of the apartment, wooden dresser catching
your eye to show up later, in a painting not related
to me, also there as someone only partially related to me,
searching the world as your own scout for signs of
visible life, the dresser livelier than me, its grains, fronts—

Feast or Famine

I knew the Manhattan you grew up in well indeed—
the Upper West Side— gruesomely built of blocks
of primitive brick and stone. But, for you, with two
orchestra musician parents, a ticket into New York
Bohemia, bagels and lox from Zabar's, then nothing,
popcorn, then back to Zabar's. Whether feast or
famine, no forced schooling for you, just days at
home with paints and canvases, from a young
age, for company— hours of repetition, breakthroughs.
Always unease, that what you wanted to paint
was too formal, too advanced, for the land
of Warhol and Koons. You were ready for Philly.
PAFA, drugs, dykes, all in preparation for
finding it, your mind's precious Rosetta Stone.

Your vision grew limpid as your life went crazy—
ensconced in the Center City beau monde,
directing traffic, wedded to an Irish witch
who wished you the worst in the end, every
distillation of visual perfection in your brain
found refulgent form, as you found time to
fall into my arms as well, and I rode analogous waves.
Why it was all lost then was simple— the girls,
your girls, didn't like it. They were threatened
by a genius they knew to be easily trounced.
I never let you go. I still won't: the halcyon
nights we spent remain the guiding light of
my life, in this world and beyond, you and Mary,
bruises or afterthoughts be damned, Rosetta Stoned—

Michelangelo's *Tarantula*

If she left us nought but paintings, no pictures of herself,
what else might we say of Diana, except that she was also
Jenny? I could always mail to her in space, wherever she is,
a copy of *How To Win Friends and Influence People*. Or the prize
of a free golden easel, for having forced her hand in where
others dared to be more real. For always looking slightly
different, and as is fashionable in the mid-Twenties, a hundred
dollar gift card at Bloomingdale's, so that access be granted
to the elite of make-up counters. I saw her blonde, brunette,
and tawny. There can't be resentment at throwing the paintings
around— she could paint— but knowing why her expert moves
to seduce me, employed at a moment of maximum susceptibility
on my part, worked, I am inclined just to understand why whoever
she really was, would have to skulk in interminable shadows for

the time being. Diana, who was Jenny, can never disguise herself
in the paintings. She's a livid soul. The Maryland sticks I refuse to
comment on much, except to say that, to paraphrase Jeremy, *even
their minor accomplishments are overshadowed by their utter anonymity*. So,
I went around like Michelangelo's *David* (a bumbling oaf, sort of,
as Mary saw it), fucking everything in sight, and I fucked her
and fucked her again— as a blonde, a brunette. I was to miss her in
representative tawny form, because that was the most real, right?
A dumb oaf like me is righteous material as a sitter but to be avoided
as a husband. Mary proved that. Or did she? Diana just wanted to be
the Jenny to show up, surprise everyone and cause trouble. Just like
all those lovely tarantulas she so admired. There is no Michelangelo's
Tarantula, but that's the whole point. Mary's idealism, and handy
camera, gutter-ball into Kanzler's shadows, and eternal vacancy.

Cabinet

The painter's brain seeks the transcendental
in sensuality; once it's achieved, does the routine
maintenance work of holding it, conserving it,
memorizing it, filing it away in the special cabinet
for what makes human life, in all of its squalor,
worth living. It was taken for granted, when we
were good, that we could give each other such a life.
This marked place, I have a cabinet for, too.
The places are all marked: Logan Square, for one,
as the sunset appeared from bay windows; Liberty Place Towers
to the right, due south; the Franklin Institute due
north, courtyard full of curiosities. It is understood
that these are what make up your brain: colors,
forms, tableaus— a succession that was me for you, too.

Sultry nights in West Philadelphia were another
vocabulary for us— grass plots dotted the concrete
yard beneath your window, wood-paneled floor, wooden
dresser taking our tripped-out trysts, making them
rustic. A poet's brain transcendentalizes language
and philosophy— I always trusted as secure, what
started with you and sense. Grounded in sense,
right there on Baltimore Avenue, was an implicit
engagement with taking what was banal in
the script of our consciousness, shaking it loose.
It's all in my own cabinet now, about shock, spark.
No one ever gave me a better life— pathways
from sense to oversoul-level awareness, fastening
color to what could remain uncolored. Passions.

Credits

Argotist Online Poetry— "The Studio"

As/Is: "Gratis," "Side-Armed," "September Heat,"

fourW twenty-eight— "Nights I Staggered Drunkenly (earlier draft)"

Ink Pantry— "Frequencies," "Starlight"

Lothlorien Poetry Journal— "Dresser," "Live Forever"

Many Mountains Moving— "4325 Baltimore Avenue (draft)"

Monday Journal: "Undulant"

Moss Trill: "Portal-Ways"

Otoliths: "Cabinet," "Frequencies II," "Russian Roulette II"

PennSound: "The Painter," "The Studio," "Starlight," "Live Forever," "Undulant," "Feast or Famine," "Portal-Ways," "Cabinet," "Riot Grrrl"

P.F.S. Post: "Genius Loci," "Frequencies," "Unhinged," "4325 Baltimore Avenue"

Pi Review: "Riot Grrrl"

Scud: "Star Child"

Synchronized Chaos: "The Painter," "Glass Doors"

The Seattle Star: "Feast or Famine," "Stoli"

III. Miscellaneous Sonnets

Swiss Army Knife

Lizzie enlisted her Swiss Army knife,
started sawing away at my arm as I arranged
my rock collection in our dirty basement,
which she was visiting. Joanna dozed in
the corner. As she saw first blood, Lizzie
lifted up my wrist, which was being used,
and sucked away. It so happens this, my first
genuine affair, hit me at three, with a witch
and a vampire who I loved, but who lived
to rock the proverbial boat. I took her on
rock collecting expeditions in the woods
near the Old York Road Little League fields,
and she remained happy as long as her steel
did its business, which I liked then, still feel.

Boston

"I suppose he told you that I landed
between his legs like a roguish girl…
well, you could say it happened that
way. You could also say he sold me
on the idea of veined trade, or that his
musky Scotch breath excreted wafts of
blue bloodiness into me. You are perverse
to ask me these things, moon peering over
your shoulder like another rogue. For now,
he lays upon an altar you don't know is
there: drunk, blue." The director called
cut; stagehands shuffled towards cigarettes.
I wandered down the aisle towards the stage,
about to land, looking for your money-shot—

found a ticket to Boston, first-class, reservations
for a four-star Boston hotel, invitation for an
audience with a Brahmin princess. The dream,
I thought, continues, as I saw you sit on the stage,
begin to peruse a style magazine which has now
been discontinued. I laughed, too, as there is no
fashion in a freezing New England winter, but
your breasts, which are considerable, do get extra-
perky, and when you try to sit on my face, I just
might let you. As for your old rival, she's got
wings to star in a musical over in Cambridge,
a version of Guys & Dolls they've got going.
It's a sparkling scene in every direction; an epoch-
making time. The cage has sixty-nine layers of gild.

Bringing Down the Light

At one point, I had a room in Henniker
overlooking the Contoocook. At night,
lights from the stores down the road (I
shopped for snacks, booze) shone on
the moving river, improving it, casting
an ethereal glow on its surface, birthing
in me a drunken high I still carry, about
New England in winter. The store-lights
here were about artifice, humanity, taking
Nature hung in one perpetual blue sky above
us, bringing down the light to create effects.
The light that most truly shone, the Contoocook
knew. She was an admixture of dark and light,
lived in the river. That's a metaphor. Or water.

Jim Jones

Refugee from a tempest, I arrived in New
England feeling like I conducted electricity,
like anything could happen to me. The pissed
community didn't like where I was publishing
(or, to be uncharitable but more accurate, that
I was publishing at all). I was on the phone
with the Philly arts press, right there in Henniker.
Only moments later, Mary would arrive, easily
a match for her Philly counterpart, able to wager
I'd climbed up a mountain, might be able to help
her. Jon Anderson, turns out, had become the Jim
Jones he wanted to be, followers crawling out of
his ass. Becky Hilliker's life was its own wager,
on one great poem she was depending on me

to publish. All that imagery she shared with Mary—
the water, fish, how bodies of water resonate with
women, fish also— coalesced into a sense that she
was a pistol that needed badly to be loaded. All
the action happened that summer underwater, in
cahoots with this primordial semi-darkness— Becky
talks on the phone with Gaetan in Philadelphia,
reveals for the ages that that city is no stranger to
her— Becky strips to bra and panties, rope-swings
into the Contoocook— and, of course, Mary and I
drink a concoction of pure cyanide Kool-Aid, so that
an eternity of massacres ensues between Boston
and Virginia, families wasting followers like ants. Yet I
carried with me, implicit, brotherly love for all. Or tried.

Frequencies

for Mary Walker Graham

I.
"We're at our most bestial when threatened not
with hatred but indifference; what our blood wants
is reaction of some kind." New Hampshire night,
our own reaction, you pliant, penetrable, laid out beneath me as
flies fidgeted our room, pirouetted moist air. Yet
we sank beneath bestiality to do just what indifferently
we wanted, beneath our glut of blood, so the summoned
beasts might react with this: ripped limb from limb,
buried in low-lying Virginia swamp marsh, given what
aphorism is only got in extinction, darling, as I quote
what you said at the bar before. In other words, they
hated us. The one-night stand wouldn't matter if your
brain didn't have the right words in it: stories, sequences,
slammed-down metaphors of a singed self. Frequencies.

II.
As the world between her legs tightened around
her, what she saw in bed with me was stark: okra,
stamens, roots, all that in nature coalesces in erect
growth; and a shadow father bent, then erect, then
bent again, perverse from amassing wealth in a world
whose submissiveness poisons him. Beneath the sultry,
wooded surface, what I saw was a semi-frightened
animal, along for an all-night ride (gruesomeness of
4 a.m. New Hampshire sun), knife thusly thrusting
into the backs of everyone around her, managing
to have stamina enough against constraint to take
what she was taking. The mattress thumped: above,
an angel was unable to conceal laughter, understanding
it was all in the script, including the garish sun's leer.

State of Grace

Grape soda bottle on the desk; wind, out of
Eleusis, shut the door. Our clothes came
off; your limbs spun like spokes. I peered
outside; it was light. New Hampshire summer
sun, four a.m. Poets to face at breakfast.
Workshops to sit through, lectures, but I
knew I'd never have you the right way
again, or any way. We'd done the thing
once we'd been meaning to do, so as I
stepped from the window, gazed at you
dozing, naked, I thought to myself, maybe
that's what amounts to a state of grace—
you're given something once, fully, so
that you may be satiated with it, and that's it—

Luggage

Luggage lugged in by refugees from wealthy
families lay beside the bed we occupied, to
do our dance. I saw it, in the middle of the action—
black leather, initials embossed in gold— tried
not to notice that it was sentient. It berated you,
for the duration of our tryst, delineating ways this
was a betrayal, to sleep with someone of inferior caste
stripe, with steep consequences. When a severed
head broke briefly out of a suitcase, it reminded
you, red-tongued, the debt you owed could never
be paid back, the grisliness you visited upon your
clan could never be rectified. All the severed head
looked to me like was roses with thorny stems, tied
in a knot— clairvoyantly, you saw the real deal. The sleeping roll

predicted your condition as mendicant when the sex
was over, the word passed. The abomination between
your legs could only be alleviated by the anti-Vaseline
which sat leeringly on top of the luggage pile, lubed
from yellow to fluorescent blue. The luggage, to me,
was just prejudice from a sector I chose not to understand.
All I knew is that our bodies compelled us to co-mingle.
That was enough. Off in the distance, trumpets blared
to begin a holy war. Red seas were parted. A king perused
the catalogue they'd given him, jeweled scepter scoping
out highlights. I was a pawn. He knew— if you own the guns
and the money, everything else comes, too. You, then, fell
asleep. I was entranced by the early sunlight. I thought
of states of grace, you dreamed of Red Death. More luggage.

New Hampshire

I could've used you in New
Hampshire that summer, rope-
swinging into Contoocook River,
dope-huffing out in the fields
with Jon Anderson, his gang,
your future rival (unbeknownst
to all) tapping her feet in anticipation
of new reasons to mope, make
metaphor. I could've understood
why it might be that your rival
could never be your friend—
too tense about counting her fingers,
toes, too loose on the juice, or
(cruelly, for all) maybe just right, simpatico?

Frontiersman

As Mr. Anderson levitated, with lascivious abandon, above
the seminar room, his baby Bowie knife did its mischievous
task of shearing one white slat of the blinds in half. That
there could be a baby version of a Bowie was unknown to me.
The seminar room sloped upwards from the front— Jon
crouched like a frontiersman, skinning what itself could have
been a mischievous rattlesnake. The snakeskin would then
become, perhaps, a prize or trophy to adorn an abode not
much less primitive than a tee-pee, leaving the frontier half-
conquered. As one bemused by New England operations, I
did not need a reason to understand why the emergence of
the baby Bowie was necessary. I carried with me, that odd
afternoon, the brotherly love that, from Philadelphia to New
Hampshire, affirmed that force could be necessary, even among poets.

Pricey

For reasons pertaining to mysterious circumstances
perpetually manifesting behind her, the obvious sense
of the erotic, of us as potential lovers, never happened
with Becky and I. She was from a rich family like Mary,
or wasn't; was engaged to a newfangled Kennedy look-
alike in Boston, or wasn't; gave hints of being suspiciously
well-traveled, Boston not being her real home, or didn't;
the Becky circle game in Henniker never resolved any way.
As I watched her strip to rope-swing into the Contoocook,
there was in her physiology something desperate, something
that wanted badly out of whatever situation she was in. Swing
she did, as I had, the river briefly swallowing up the blonde
with pricey curves who no one was allowed to know that well.
Except to say that she had obviously read Mary, though the two

were wary of each other, and admired the river-deep heft, drowning
potential, of who Mary was in text, the dramatic persona she had
invented for herself— sullen, yet regal as the queen of Egypt.
Whether the pyramids for Becky were the same tropical resorts,
mansions, five-star hotels, rented yachts, and acres of plush green
as they were for Mary, in the end doesn't matter, falls away in
irrelevance. The queen's eyes direct a piercing gaze at, or into,
the female body's acknowledged or unacknowledged death-in-life,
stasis amid whatever dynamism pretends to assert its force,
horror at empty tomb-like space filled with mummies preserved
from livid memories. For the few seconds Becky was submerged
in the Contoocook, the idea of the voluptuous female was
tormented into awareness of superficiality, like a five-star hotel,
which offers a continental breakfast, no guarantee of morning sun.

Stetson

Understanding how narratives intersect, wanting
also, in this book, to stay crisp about telling the truth,
it stands to reason it should be known that at this time,
Abby would have no idea I was in Henniker, or what or
where Henniker was, or about Becky and the rest. Abby's
knowledge of my day-to-day life was so-so, as was mine
of hers. Mary, Philadelphia Mary, was off our maps then
too, having briefly sold her wares back to a semi-forgiving
family, eager to bury her in money and marriage lectures.
Mary was a sucker to briefly believe, too. Abby, I now
believe, would've wanted to paint the Contoocook, and Becky,
and would remain unsatisfied that Becky continue as anything
but one of her girls. Mary, Boston Mary, was slightly too mean,
too hard. The juxtaposing of Abby and Henniker, in fact,

involves an Abby-style catalogue of how the place looked being
created, even as that task be placed in inexpert hands. Pivot-
pointed by the campus we occupied, the first point of interest
were several streets, placed at a close-but-odd angle to said
campus, of the kind of ornate, plantation worthy houses you
might associate with Tennessee Williams plays. In fact, one
spook of Henniker was a ricochet to places like Tennessee,
or the Great Plains. You might hear, in Henniker, country
music at any moment, or see a Stetson hat. Home on the range.
The campus, linked to the town by a paved bridge, was built
on the basic principle of the down-home. Abby, I predict,
would've liked the river-view deck at Daniel's, the town's
premier tavern, and all the different ways the town framed
the river, including big, rustic log cabins, complete with portal-ways.

Laps

Odd, cutting in from an angle as it does to
suggest a level of eternal damnation— that what
happens in the world is often second or third tier
garbage, what could have happened consequently rules
the celestial seasonings roost— Becky, I believe, had
in her something more wild, more libidinous than Mary did.
I saw it as she stripped down by the Contoocook—
the desperation on view was part of a double-sided
coin deal, the other side of which was, or appeared
to be, ecstatic release. Mary and I were trapped in an
advanced version of a dormitory room; if I attempt
to encompass the imagined seduction of Becky, I
notice in my own physiology the sense that the river
would have to stay in view, our rite an advanced

Innisfree rite, connecting us in a vital way to the landscape.
The Becky I imagine is not a semi-frightened animal,
along for someone else's suggested ride. The metaphors
in her head are forgotten, as she channels the great
post-language wavelength of real sex. Mary's words
were herself— no more, no less. Becky chips away
at something in language she likes, but the fish in her
is fluent, past language, at the expressive motion
games beyond any articulation at all, when existence
is just doing. Our brief tribe manned fields usually
empty at night— I extend my imagination back to
those fields, to find if this fish is striped, in the secret
way female fish are striped, to accommodate what laps
we might do, so anticipate the gruesome New Hampshire sun.

Suffering Nature-Goddess

For the male of the species to gaze into the swamp or
morass of female subjectivity— when the male would be
me, I first notice this peculiarity— that Becky and Mary
seem to station themselves so uncannily close together, when
the creation of text is the issue. The acknowledgement of
bodies of water as an objective correlative is nothing new.
Why the city of Boston engendered female textual twins,
to take bodies of water and add to them a note of dementia,
horror, ominous lubricity, shot through, in a contradictory
way, with equally intense sensuality, transcendentalized into
phenomenological plays in self-created textual zones, lifted
into an ether of the female body magnified a thousand-fold—
suffering nature-goddesses, crucifixion by absorption in nature
nailed to brains— is difficult or impossible to know. I do know

that the zone I write from has more city in it, less nature. I could
never be a suffering nature-god. But perhaps at the end it is about
New England itself, what the ricochet of all those long winters
built into these poetesses, about mythologies found most appealing,
also about suffering and redemption. The night at Daniel's in Henniker
Becky sat caddy-corner to me, in a pink polo shirt with the collar
up, as I had seen the stiffer kids do at U of Penn, I understood that,
as postures go, Becky was too real, too human, to really pull it off.
No one thought she was a liar or a poseur. I simply watched, as she
made her exit for the night at around eleven, that she was slightly
downtrodden with alcohol and loneliness. Mary was a more dire open
wound— alcohol and loneliness meant she might just take someone
home with her. Someone had to stop the bleeding. Becky was able
to hide the spilled blood. But the core— suffering nature-goddess— they shared.

To Jon Anderson

I have to laugh, Jon, to remember how
the moon hung over the open field
behind the river, where we all sat, smoking
your spliffs, reciting poems, and, for me,
checking in with the Philly squad to see
if everything remained in place. What's
funny is that what we never found out
remains the most important thing— how
far would or did they follow you, after
the party was over; what more could you
make them do? Hypnotized into place,
set in staunch motion by bells ringing all
over the goddamned place, what gave?
The wildness of lying in the New England

grass, deep into the night, seemed to tell me
we'd never find out. What you would do
with your tribe would be your secret, ribald
or righteous, just as I'd retreat invisibly
from this crew back to Center City, Becky
back to her brahmins, Talia back to Rhode
Island, God knows where, and the rest.
What we meant there that night was funny,
kiddies let loose to party all night, yet
kicked in the ass by fate to acknowledge
that when a group creates a frequency in
the universe, it can linger in space for
a long time, humming its tune, smoking
its dope, carrying the river, making it earth.

Assault Rifles

Amidst other thumping noises, another monster emerged
in Henniker: distant, at first, and then deafening, yet only
to me. Steve seemed like a modest Midwestern kid.
Beneath a corn-fed exterior, he had a maverick streak.
We finalized a friendship, formed from frowning on what
this New England context was— a poetry plateau
parading its points towards a tepid center. We both felt
beckoned by the avant-garde, its brainish insistence on seeing past
cliché. The Internet was emerging as a new Wild West
for the avant-garde to play around in— we wanted in.
Chicago was Steve's promised land. As the Aughts
extended its parameters, and as we were deadly serious
(others, more casual in Henniker, moved their
money, cultivated courtly connections), I took the plunge,

found myself in Palatine. The Midwest impressed itself
on me: flatlands, everything spaced at odd angles (unlike
the East Coast's loaded clusters), more presence, liveliness
to the firmament (sky seemed to reach down, do a scoop),
bungalows arrayed everywhere. Steve had ins with the scene—
we assaulted Chicago, hungrily, which happened to be
crawling with avant-gardists at that time. It was a dream—
to really pierce into a foreign, unexpected city, exotically.
No way, still, to see where it might lead. Out in Palatine,
Steve crafted calculated moves. He produced books hewn
of disjuncture, skewered directions, historical lampoons.
We saw the same things happen, around the international
avant-garde, at the same time. Our online routes were similar.
What you did in the city was, better be, assault rifles displayed. Mister.

Author's Bookshelf

"I am the hippest bookshelf in the Midwest. All hail!"
An émigré, such as I was, walked North Milwaukee Ave
as though it were Main Street, Manayunk. Myopic Books beckoned,
always, from a huge height of literary hipness, and yes,
I got them to carry me, Steve not having a full-length yet.
Few of us get to realize such glamor-puss goals— going
forward, the phallic thrust of conquest is never continual.
In fact, time's waters forced a soaking in the sluggishness
of stasis for this particular writer, wrung out on a decade
of complete craziness, as he was. All I needed to know then,
as the congeries of circumstances brought matters to a head,
was that this was lifetime material, a miraculous prize. That's as I
understood how the game, beginning with Myopic, had gone.
It was to be made an instant classic. A king from a pawn.

Standing in the June Heat

Standing in the June heat outside
a dank, dreary Andersonville bar,
not hustling your ass for a night in
your apartment, how young were we?
Had I dissolved into a post-fantasy
version of me, potent past the little
first edition you had me sign (Aughts
energy, whirlwinds, celebrities, cities,
caught up in a new century blowing
instant nuts off instantly), or was it
the same old Indiana shuck and jive—
in love, lust, life, lit, to move past
corn is to be husked, cradled down
into shallow graves; all selves underground?

Into the Dawn

If I contrived it— vodka-rocked, summer-burnt—
from Moody's Pub in Andersonville to her pad,
placed in an obscure part of the Loop— the mystery,
what might've been, remains. Stacy had her own obscurity
skirmish to surmount— the filthy rich minister's daughter
from Indiana, with a religious calling to avant-garde lit,
and blonde goddess to boot— who had, by the fateful night,
fallen in love with my first full-length. There they were,
covering the plush, green-toned flat symbolically,
as I imagine them— the good book and the racket
book— the actual bible, with the bible I had
penned for her. That, I believe, is the unholy
heist I would've uncovered, maybe roughly,
in that flat. Not in her bed, I would guess—

despite the resemblance to women from my past,
I would've received the floor to sleep on. Leading
us off the cliff of the cross, and another cross borne— the one
hung solemnly on her wall, about her childhood,
family, heritage, money— and the one borne in her
heart, which wanted to live as I had with Mary & Abby,
staunch sensory immersion in a series of starlit moments.
That's the key to Stacy's dilemma, universalizing
the night's detritus, which would've been the same
had I accompanied her home or not. To unify body
and soul is the work of several long lifetimes.
The divided, L-shaped human race cannot conceive
of a reality in which the books are all good.
As a person part text, I held her all night, into the dawn.

Colliding Crops

April cruelty of rain-chilly wind, six months
until harvest— Stacy stands on the verge of
a realm not tearless, but over tears, so that
tears themselves form a kind of second skin
around her, and the child to be born in cried
out— here, I notice, is a place where I could've
been no one, still have no substance, and what
pours out of me, as I absorb the Indiana
farm-land, is just refuse of what I've never had—
this is what she writes out of. The erstwhile female
is replaced by a raw-nerved, patterned, womanly
archetype, solid as a silo, to be picked at by the
little-minded for occupying space in a man's arid
world. Corn-rows tilt to be livid both ways.

Apostrophe

Chop up text from dirty French novels,
throw in some candy hearts, make it a production,
all for what reason? That this was all building
to some astonishing climax, as our bodies
reached through envelopes to grasp with greedy
hands desired limbs? I wasn't sick of it then, because
it is interesting to dance with raw desire— to imagine
the eyes, the breasts, the sex, how they all might look
in motion, in rapture, in the only text that really matters,
from the safety and security of line by line, phrase by
phrase, apostrophe by apostrophe. The letters remain,
tied up in a pink ribbon, in files closeted, now just
memories of limbs once animated by real heat,
forcing language to go where it falters, where hands give way.

Mobiles (2009)

It's company of flesh and blood
I need, your blonde head beneath,
pillows scattered around us like
confetti, memories of loneliness
suddenly quaint as "thou," our
voices in the air like hung mobiles—
then, all the thousands of words left
behind in throats overtaken by cries,
grateful awe before near (dear) extinction.
But you are not here, you've become just
a lack, something scrawled on a series
of sheets, useful only to tell me that
words have holes in them where nothing fits—
wind moves the mobiles past position articulation.

To Stacy Blair (2009)

A flaxen beacon in my brain—
how could you be more than
this: an ideal reader lapping
up my obscure literature on
a foreign continent, a fingered
box opened to strange whims,
a space mapping interstellar
distances, overdriven in lust,
overcome. Yet when I sit
and write this out, I see how much
there is of you in me; I don't
know how it happened, except
that you read yourself into my
body, an ocean of wine, salt.

Power Yoga

The way it had been, in the realm of benevolent decadence,
power yoga, for Mary and I, had been about a pulverizing
impulse to get as high as possible, and to achieve as much
ecstasy along with it. This had been accomplished with
the jouissance of two equals, who were equally bandits
about trouncing day-to-day life with levitational exercise.
Now, days and months passed in which I was always asked
to pick Mary up at a Walnut Street Studio, up in the 40s,
parallel to Baltimore, after she spent a few hours baking in
a room heated up to ninety degrees, doing yoga poses in
tights, or other leotard outfits, which tended to emphasize
her extreme leanness, testimony to a noodles-n-vegetables
diet, unbalanced by the emergence of fats or proteins. I was
asked to eat dessert, when I did, on my own. I always found

funny, that the idea of power yoga, in an Arizona-simulation
room, gave Mary the sense that her physical mechanism was
cared for. We still did some levitational tasks. But power yoga
was adumbrated for her along with her membership in Mariposa,
West Philly's organic food co-op of choice, making it a clean
sweep for vegan Mary to holistically redeem her years of excess.
Mary was eager for me to try power yoga myself. I demurred,
along my own party lines, well-worn ones, that power walking
all over Center City did the task I needed to do of keeping my
own mechanism in shape. The mood of the Aughts in Philadelphia
had begun to dissipate. Now it was or seemed to be, every
individual for themselves. The real power yoga we did together
was to understand that Mary's family was keeping a tight rein
on her. No meandering forward on an endless road. We were a stretch.

Moue

I reunited with Mary cordially, familiarly. Yet by that time
my talk about Chicago, New York, London, Australia, was
scenester talk. It took for granted, being an *in* person on a fast
track. Attendant on being *in*, a fulsome load of log-rolling to do,
all day every day, so that I rolled logs to Mary, in front of Mary, in spite
of Mary, around Mary, and so on. I noticed what anyone
would notice. Mary just did not have it in her to harness
her queenly, court-honed instincts and put those logs into
rolling motion herself. There was not a perpetual *moue*, but when
I spoke about in-crowd matters, Mary gained a glazed, tuned-out
look, not interested in what I heard about the feud tearing apart
the East Village, or my own feuds, which were substantial.
She was more interested in picking up lentils at Mariposa.
Mary was meant, we both discovered, just to paint.

The Blasted and The Balanced

Keener eyes than mine have discerned— Philadelphia has ways and means of mixing elegance with dilapidation, engendering urban landscapes that mix grit with grace. Mary would not be on Baltimore Avenue if the architecture did not balance what was inevitably decay, detritus, concrete jungle ambience, stenches of exhaust fumes and the rest. So that, for Mary to paint from Spring Garden, it had to be the admixture, again, of the filthy and the fine, the blasted and the balanced, or her brain could not generate correct cognition conditions for colors and forms to manifest. The sense in Mary of discretion, lifting her above the art rabble, what I would call hipster-ism, made it so that when Mary opened the door to her 915 Spring Garden co-op, it was with the sense that her being who she was would, also inevitably, make whatever was painted rise above the rabble and do its own dance of the blasted and the balanced.

Spring Garden

Because our rigors of love and lust had so much starlight in them in the early Aughts, it was easy for me to see, many years later, that Mary had tired slightly against all demonstrative physicality. There was less she was in the mood to do, and what she did was less involved and less generous. It felt, often, as though she were withdrawing from life in general, interest by interest, piece by piece. The last conflagration of energy went into painting *The Fall*. Once that had been accomplished, the sense was that she manifested as a completely privatized person. In other words, she did not manifest. All the totems of our marriage were left to me. Towards the end, I had taken her on the road. She met the poets in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Boston. What she made of the other Mary was uncannily about a resemblance which made me laugh up close. Mary from Boston was retreating by that

time, too, as a major recession moved in on the United States. All of us in the late Aughts flailed around resource-piles which began to disappear. Mary's co-op studio in Spring Garden, where I posed nude for *The Fall*, was the site of no cocaine madness, sexualized histrionics, or any delinquency. Mary's family had kicked the shit out of her. In a way, it was better. She was more deliberate about what might amount to her final artistic statements. Cocaine buzzes had made her careless. Except, now she had to feel all the painful emotions the cocaine used to render pleasurable, luxuriantly numb. There was no escaping that her painting life was a long, slow road. Several floors up in Spring Garden, as she had been in her PAFA studio, and with the grunge of North Philadelphia beneath her feet, she found time to tame, demystify my naked body, the body of Adam, for herself. He was *David*, too. But he wasn't Jesus. Or even close.

Javelins

for Jenny Kanzler

Artfully arranged arrows engorge hidden quivers
she carries, everywhere she goes. Each day registers
as a clarion call to the hunt. Javelins are squirreled
away for special hunt days. The self-generated mystique
of the girl warrior magus makes others nervous.
What makes it onto canvas— Spanish-colored visions
of child-like dilapidation, children blankly born into
the special dwarf dodo dance the human race does— takes,
transcendentalizes violence into a vision quest for the most
morose human truth, tripping eyes into realizations of
deep, absurd diminutions. This is a woman unused to
conventions, around that word (love) which cannot appear
in her paintings, themselves sharp like javelins. Her eyes
cannot be anything but green, but her carnivore streak is pure earth.

I cannot deign to speak of where, how, why she was raised,
except to say that what was needy in her crystallized as
her most precious asset. The child in her cannot die.
That the special circumstance is not a coincidence—
the analogous morose days I spent in Bethesda in my
own childhood, dragged unwillingly by those I
had no idea were adversaries into a matrix, corrupt
in its tininess, lying in all directions to cover up
stunted, blunt motives— can remain in the grave
where it belongs. It's all too sad. But transmuting
sadness into anger, anger into representational panache,
is what this Diana does best. She, too, would look
ravishing at the center of the Great Stair Hall.
And could laugh, here and there, at the whole thing. Between shots.

Pride (in the name of love)

The buildings are the road, voyage, reason.
The spirit you think is there, in architecture, is there,
along with other spirits, namely, spirits
hewn into coexisting nature, creating a sublime sense of
balance. Apotheosis of coexistences.
The collection of buildings here is resonant— shudders,
palpitates, resonates. Where and how you get touched
is the enchantment variable. It could be Fayette Street (two churches),
City Hall in May, Butler Pike, even the lunar landing
lunacy of Dekalb Pike. The road you travel on is into the cosmos.
This is it— my Philadelphia. The buildings say everything.
What I say now is reason again, to bring us
roundabout— the buildings are the road.
What is really in the cosmos remains the mystery.

Butler Pike

The entropy, enervation of a recession—
consciousness rots, abraded by the obtrusiveness
of a dull, jagged populace— I stroll down
Butler Pike, snapping pictures of the houses,
and the buildings penetrate into my brain,
more than the people. Architecture is its
own phenomenological explosion, occupying
space inside/outside the mind, standing in now,
for better or for worse, for the people who
could occupy similar space— what I notice,
as sentience emanating from the buildings,
is that architecture is how the human race
expresses its relationship to nature. Here,
our choice is a sturdy yet ethereal harmony,

formidable, eerie, which foresees who might
occupy the houses, and yet chooses to manifest
the ornate over the plebeian, or merely practical.
When the ornate (the aesthetic) is set in place
in the Philadelphia suburbs, it is an expression,
also, of the region's apparitional vision, relation to
a wider world than even material nature; out
into physical space, into the cosmos, against
the restraining force of the earthly. So, in a
roundabout way, I get closer to the individuals
who have planned or charted the buildings
through allowing them (both) to seep into my brain.
Relationships, in recessional times, abstract
themselves— I stretch towards acceptance, gratitude.

Starlight II

What starlight means to someone sober, such
as I was not in the old days— it would have to be
the sense of lives lived not uselessly. As in, who
we were had a burning sense of purpose, even
amid the ecstasy of moments we lived through—
gossamer ones to hold onto. It was not for nothing
who we were, what we did. How the grass-plots,
yellow-leaved autumn trees, other foliage, informed
us, heedless as we were, was that we would gradually
ripen into a long life no matter what. If that life
would have to begin with me, so be it. The sense
of sexual union, crescendo, orgasm, was in our
brains too, about what had moved us, and made
all the libidinous business resonate on a double level.

We were in each other's bodies, and in each other's
brains, I dare say, the right way. If an odder family
has never been seen, a family we were. The starlight
which could descend on Mary's room— eastern
exposure, lavishing the long wooden dresser with
flat countertop surface, Mary's various paraphernalia—
has now transmuted into a knowing stripe. Assured,
also, of enterprises, personal and otherwise, coming
full circle, just as Abby used circular forms to out-
Klimt Gustav himself, and of eternity borne out
through trust in nature, long patience. So I leave
myself with Mary there, doing what we always did,
but precocious about vindication, passages, reality.
The starlight finds a little place for us, for this.

Strange Side

There's the strange side we were on— the ones
who most mean it about high art— in earnest, of
course, about form and content on high levels. Then,
the side which accrues to and against that side, about
pedestrian reality, paying bills. Then the side which
attempts to mediate these realities, day by day,
out of which other sides emerge, escape valve sides,
wanting to get drunk and high. And so on. The strange
side means a strange life of partial or total alienation,
surfaces found insulting. The recompense for Mary
and I— our nudity to each other was strange nudity.
On the strange side, how much interpenetration
could be possible between two human beings, as
something worth investigating, could land us on

alien terrain, so that at 3 am, in a fit of blended
love and lust, being inside her could be participation
in the space-innards of the Milky Way, language
expanding from images, vice versa, simple white
sheets ample space for stars to be born, live entire
lives, and die on, as though our bodies scooped up
primordial ooze to allow the universe to be born
from them again. Now, I sit in a diner on Fayette Street,
still on the strange side, and take from pedestrian
reality what I can take, sort of alienated on sort of
alien terrain, sort of drunk and high, and nothing has
to end, sort of. I still mean it about high art. No
sort of there. I think of Mary then, love still blends
with lust. Stars live and die all over again. Strange.

Marble

"You little paranoid bitch, doesn't it ever
bother you that you're incapable of having
relationships? You tell me you "feel awful all
the time," don't you think there's a reason for it?"
That was my mindset, the last time Abby was
splayed out on my floor, once I'd moved into
a less idyllic, low-ceiling'd, un-sensual flat. No sex, just the sense
that the wall between us was insurmountable, on
every level. Abby never adjusted to cell-phones—
never had one. She refused, also, to do e-mail.
By this time, she was both obviously on the loose
and obviously elusive. She dumped her bike in front of my building.
I spent her tirades attempting this jeremiad in my head,
and putting her on tape, as she was supposed to be

talking about Mary. She was being naughty, brooding
about herself. Late summer, bedraggled, just as this
February day is bedraggled by extreme cold, Plymouth
Meeting under ice-sheets under ice-sheets, the East
Coast gasping for heat. The tapes, precious ones, also got
dumped when I moved out here. No getting them
back. Just the sense, on my fiftieth birthday, that the real
vaunted gift has to be that I ever heard her voice at all,
in a world full of promising circuits never established,
incendiary matches never made. So Abby felt awful
all the time, and why shouldn't she? Like everyone
else worth a damn, she missed the ticket to her own
enfranchisement. But the last almost-fuck is now marble.
That window-view— parking lots— Abby a mystery, finally.

Concrete-slab

A West Philly squat: no windows, most likely underground.
Abby leads an extremely uncomfortable life, but her looks
remain intact. One of her girls gives her a little clip-on, hand-held
camera, and Abby establishes the ritual of taping herself
delivering monologues. This becomes the backbone of her own
YouTube station; and when Abby rants about the hypocrisy
of "Militant Atheism" (there are no militant atheists, the nature
of atheism negates militancy), she generates big numbers.
The station, I notice bemusedly, is a reasonable success.
It's nothing Mary would ever do. It's just that the concrete-slab
walls are ugly. I knew instinctively— all that suicide talk
wasn't just blarney. The irony is that a little faith in a higher
power at that time would've offset those concrete-slab walls
very nicely for Abby. Her self-destructiveness overdosed on Godlessness.

Amenities II

Stomach-plummets, the ultimate hemorrhage for
those watching who cared— at a certain point, it was
obvious to all that Abby was sticking needles up her
rear end. She spoke in speeded-up bursts, rode single
points for too long, fidgeted restlessly when forced to
sit still, and it fed her TV persona, to be sure, but her
already paranoid temper took her over a steep cliff when
the camera stopped rolling. If I was going to avoid being
on the receiving end of another tantrum, I'd have to stay
out of her way. Not that I saw her around much. Still
ensconced in Logan Square, I knew she was dumped in
a hole in West Philly somewhere, and that, as hurt badly,
she had lost her family's support. She needed it. The work
she did for the dyke patrol— who knows? Except to say,

the idea was obvious, that she had no notion of painting in
the foreseeable future, or having her own place, as she once
had. Her girls were her family now. They were happy to give
her a camera, but no food, speed-up-the-ass but no insurance,
cred in the right drug houses but no heat in winter, no AC in
summer. Abby established a life with no amenities. What she
had already painted sat in storerooms, waiting to tell whoever
asked that she was not meant to be a brief flame, a degenerate
tart. I myself was pulverized into the position of confidante,
who had heard her do a monologue about suicide which didn't
make it onto the confounded station, but allowed me to
understand what a life with no amenities was all about,
speed-freaked or not. Her family in Manhattan thought
whatever they thought. The ice she skated on was too thin.

The Color of Flame

Ripping into the innards of the beast who was
our scourge, it stands to reason I should iterate
why I was not in line to save Abby. The tangle
has points of complexity, points of simplicity, too.
Abby's girls were her family. In Abby's mind, the fact
that we'd had a physical affair, which led to other
things, earned the sternest disapproval from her
girl-tribe imaginable. Yet Abby's imagination was
paranoid, and it seems unlikely now they regarded
me as that much of a bete noir for them over anyone
else. The towering rage inside her— that her family
were gone, her paintings unsuccessful, her entire
life reduced to almost-complete material impoverishment—
instinctively lashed out at anything which threatened

her connection to the family left to her. That anything
was me. The truth buzzes around these constituent
elements uncomfortably, itself lashing out at the idea
that any of us Aughts crew knew anything about
anything— yes, I could've saved her. If she could
have been led to trust me again, rather than regard
me as a pest seducer, the work could've been done.
Of course, it was not. I can horde all the fool's gold
I want, nothing can be done now. The beast who was
our scourge, as I see it, fed on artists' bodies & souls,
who had been given too much too fast. We had no
time, in those days, to make sense of anything. We were
who we were, did what we did. We wanted our lives
the color of flame— a color, painters know, which cuts both ways.

Plain View

There it was: it could only happen once, that I
saw you for the last time. To take the livid, coal-
black rings around your eyes (black rings, also, not
surreptitiously around me-who-could-be-to-you,
who seduced you, led you away from your girls,
from whom the needle-injections tattooed all that
coal), dissolve the black into the gold which was
actually in your brain (which bid you see the world
strangely, shapes, colors, lights, movements of them,
with incredible vivid cleanliness, jarred into narrative
motion, again, by split-in-half sensibilities, being twins),
all that needs to be done is to put the paintings in
plain view in the world and step back. Plain view is still
plenty difficult, but I'm willing to find my own eye-rings to do it.

To Abby Heller-Burnham

What solidity the years deliver— against the grain
of ephemeral travesties forced into our lives, graying,
fogging our eyes— I think of you on those West Philadelphia
nights we all got bathed in starlight, in benign coloration,
so that space/time grew fluid, and complex compositions
coalesced. There, splayed out on the wooden floor of Mary's
room, without our own consummation having happened yet,
or needed to happen, the composition of my thoughts
coalesced, that now remains centered. The multi-tiered
("twinned") spatiality in your brain remains what it was,
circles under and over circles. I'm immersed in light, shade,
passageways, earth-tones, bird-eyes, and their opposites.
The composition of us together, how its resonance remains,
was imported from out in space, which we shuddered doubly into, too.

The Schuylkill Moves

The Schuylkill moves cleanly, despite
all the murk, as the Expressway looms
on the other side of it. The trees, as
usual, are Heaven, rooted much too
deeply for us to fathom, stacked at
solid angles into a receptive Universe.
I am waiting, writing on the edge of
wars, chopping through the cesspool
of centuries old shit, stunned into an
awareness of you, Abby, and of our life's binds.
When I imagine you, it's with a sense
that we're both standing at the river's
edge (we are, of course), and as long as we see,
your way, the trees shade into the sky, the binds hold—

Credits

Argotist Online: "New Hampshire"

As/Is: "Colliding Crops," "Side-Armed," "Butler Pike"

Helios Mss: "Standing in the June Heat"

Ink Pantry: "Frequencies"

Otoliths: "Frequencies II," "The Schuylkill Flows," "To Abby Heller-Burnham"

PennSound: "To Jon Anderson," "State of Grace"

P.F.S. Post: "State of Grace"

Talking About Strawberries: "Javelins"

Tears in the Fence: "Bringing Down the Light (earlier draft)"

X-Peri: "Swiss Army Knife"